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# The Role of Pollution in Agathias's *Histories*

JACK J. LENNON AND NICHOLAS WILSHERE

This article aims to draw attention to Agathias's use of pollution and impurity within his *Histories*, an aspect of his writing that has hitherto been significantly underappreciated and has important implications for our reading of the *Histories* and our understanding of Agathias as an author. The language of pollution and impurity is not only a frequent component of the *Histories*, it also plays a key role at several points within the narrative. When Agathias deploys it, he is doing far more than simply demonstrating his familiarity with classical tropes. It also enables him to draw a dividing line between the behavior and values of Romans and non-Romans, as well as serving both to emphasize the wickedness of various groups or individuals and their actions and to explain the grisly fates to which so many of them succumb. Numerous scholars have previously recognized and given much attention to Agathias's references to divine punishment falling upon the wicked, the treacherous, or the criminal, along with his theorizing on questions of collective responsibility and why the blameless sometimes appear to suffer collateral damage. However, such assessments have more typically approached the issue using the language of guilt, criminality, and sin, with the last of these, in particular, having the potential to conceal or distract from the role of pollution within the narrative. This is evident throughout Joseph Frendo's 1975 English translation of the *Histories*, but it is also reflected in the wider scholarly discourse surrounding Agathias's

work and values.<sup>1</sup> One potential explanation for this tone may be that historians have inadvertently sought to make Agathias's language "fit" within the more overtly Christian world of the sixth century (and the religious position most commonly attributed to him).<sup>2</sup>

1 For example, A. Cameron, "The 'Scepticism' of Procopius," *Historia* 15.4 (1966): 466–82, at 479; A. Cameron, "Agathias on the Early Merovingians," *AnnPisa* 37.1/2 (1968): 95–140, at 136–38; A. Cameron, *Agathias* (Oxford, 1970), 91–97; G. Gottlieb, "Die Nachrichten des Agathias aus Myrina über das Christentum der Franken und Alamannen," *JbZMusMainz* 16 (1969): 149–58, at 151–54; D. M. Olster, *Roman Defeat, Christian Response, and the Literary Construction of the Jew* (Philadelphia, 1994), 40–41; A. Kaldellis, "The Historical and Religious Views of Agathias: A Reinterpretation," *Byzantion* 69.1 (1999): 206–52, at 211–21; M. Meier, "Prokop, Agathias, die Pest und das 'Ende' der antiken Historiographie: Naturkatastrophen und Geschichtsschreibung in der ausgehenden Spätantike," *HZ* 278 (2004): 281–310, at 297; M. Whitby, "Religious Views of Procopius and Agathias," *Electrum* 13 (2007): 73–93, at 89–90; S. McDonough, "Were the Sasanians Barbarians? Roman Writers on the 'Empire of the Persians,'" in *Romans, Barbarians, and the Transformation of the Roman World*, ed. R. W. Mathisen and D. Shanzer (London, 2011), 55–65, at 63; D. Brodka, *Narses: Politik, Krieg und Historiographie* (Berlin, 2018), 168–69.

2 Cf. A. Kaldellis, *Procopius of Caesarea: Tyranny, History, and Philosophy at the End of Antiquity* (Philadelphia, 2004), 26–27. On Agathias's religious views, see Cameron, *Agathias*, 89–111; Whitby, "Religious Views," 73–94; R. Scott, "The Treatment of Religion in Sixth-Century Byzantine Historians and Some Questions of Religious Affiliation," in *Between Personal and Institutional Religion: Self, Doctrine and Practice in Late Antique Eastern Christianity*, ed. B. Bitton-Ashkelony and L. Perrone (Turnhout, 2013), 195–225, at

But whether Agathias was thinking in terms of sin or not, in his writing he appears to have made a conscious choice to refer explicitly to pollution on multiple occasions. In the process, he demonstrated his own classical learning and the influence of earlier literary traditions within the *Histories*—but such language and images serve as more than mere embellishment. The rhetoric of pollution also further explains the fates of various individuals that he discusses, as well as the fates of those around them or under their command.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, the sheer frequency with which he chose to call upon the language of pollution strongly suggests that Agathias was confident in its continuing literary and cultural validity for his contemporary audience, both as a way of judging actions perceived to be simultaneously criminal and impious and also as a way of negotiating cultural and religious difference when applied to “outsiders.” That Agathias was purposefully seeking to portray various (typically non-Roman) groups or actions as polluted, in addition to being impious, is further demonstrated by his simultaneous portrayal of key Roman figures not only as pious but also as both pure and actively seeking to avoid or expiate sources of pollution. This intention is most evident in his presentation of Justinian’s long-serving general Narses.

It is unsurprising that Agathias was intimately familiar with those earlier literary works and traditions that made the greatest use of pollution. As well as being a historian and (sometimes reluctant) practitioner of law, he was also a gifted poet whose writings demonstrate a strong familiarity with Greek tragedy, where pollution is most rife, as well as with established works of philosophy.<sup>4</sup> Anthony Kaldellis, too, has highlighted

Agathias’s deep learning as displayed through his ability to blend history with myth for the purposes of entertaining, or maybe testing, his readers’ knowledge, including in several cases (discussed below) in which pollution also had a part to play.<sup>5</sup> Agathias’s frequent use of pollution is all the more tantalizing when considered against its relative infrequency within Procopius’s *Wars*, in whose shadow Agathias and his *Histories* have always remained, since it suggests a deliberate and personal stylistic choice on Agathias’s part.<sup>6</sup> On those rare occasions when Procopius does employ pollution within the *Wars*, he uses language similar to Agathias’s and applies it in similar contexts, but it does not hold the same level of significance in terms of its frequency, nor is it used to shape the narrative.<sup>7</sup>

This article is divided into four sections, each exploring a particular event or theme within the *Histories* in which pollution plays an important role; taken together, they demonstrate Agathias’s deliberate and systematic use of pollution within his narrative. It begins by considering the invasion and subsequent destruction of the Frankish and Alamannic forces led by the brothers Butilinus and Leutharis, who attacked Italy following Narses’ defeat of the Gothic king Teias and whose pitiful and unclean deaths receive extensive and approving comment from Agathias.<sup>8</sup> This examination is followed by

198–203, contra Kaldellis, “The Historical and Religious Views of Agathias.”

3 For Agathias’s potential rejection of contemporary trends and deliberate use of classicizing language and themes within the *Histories*, see A. Kaldellis, “Things Are Not What They Are: Agathias ‘Mythistoricus’ and the Last Laugh of Classical Culture,” *CQ* 53.1 (2003): 295–300, at 299.

4 Agath. Pref. 4–13, 2.23.6–7, 3.1.2–4; *Anth. Pal.* 9.152–55 (abbreviations for ancient texts follow those of the *ODB* and *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 4th ed., ed. S. Hornblower, A. Spawforth, and E. Eidinow [Oxford, 2012]); J. Irmscher, “Zur Weltanschauung des Agathias,” in *Tagung für allgemeine Religionsgeschichte: Sonderheft der wissenschaftlichen Zeitschrift der Friedrich-Schiller-Universität*, ed. T. Lohmann (Jena, 1963), 47–53, at 47–50; Cameron, *Agathias*, 99–100; A. Kaldellis, “Agathias on History and Poetry,” *GRBS* 38 (1997): 295–305; Kaldellis, “The Historical and Religious Views

of Agathias,” 226–36, 240–41; Kaldellis, *Procopius*, 82–83, 116–17; A. Kaldellis, “The Literature of Plague and the Anxieties of Piety in Sixth-Century Byzantium,” in *Piety and Plague: From Byzantium to the Baroque*, ed. F. Mormando and T. Worcester (Kirksville, MO, 2007), 1–22, at 16; S. Gador-Whyte, “Digressions in the *Histories* of Agathias Scholasticus,” *Journal of the Australian Early Medieval Association* 3 (2007): 141–57, at 153; S. D. Smith, *Greek Epigram and Byzantine Culture: Gender, Desire, and Denial in the Age of Justinian* (Cambridge, 2019), 205. On Agathias’s familiarity with Platonic philosophy, Whitby, “Religious Views,” 74–75, offers a slightly more cautious view: “some Platonic language and phrases had become common property in the intervening centuries and so may have carried a general, educated, aura rather than precise philosophical reference.” Cf. A. Cameron, *Procopius and the Sixth Century* (Berkeley, 1985), 251.

5 Kaldellis, “Things Are Not What They Are,” 295–300. See also Irmscher, “Zur Weltanschauung des Agathias,” 47.

6 Cf. Cameron, *Agathias*, 11.

7 Procop. *Wars* 1.25.40, 2.9.8, 4.4.25, 4.15.57, 5.4.31, 8.27.28; *Buildings* 6.2.19–20; *SH* 1.28, 7.24, 9.25, 10.9, 17.42, 29.10. See also G. Greatrex, *Procopius of Caesarea: The Persian Wars; A Historical Commentary* (Cambridge, 2022), 371.

8 On the wider associations of pollution with disease and divine punishment, see R. Parker, *Miasma: Pollution and Purification in Early Greek Religion* (Oxford, 1983), 207–34; K.-H. Leven, “‘Tollwut’

a discussion of their opponent Narses, whom Agathias contrasts with Butilinus and Leutharis through the general's care and attention to the Romans' collective purity, as well as his own, both of which are offered as explanations for his ongoing military success. The third section considers one of the more bizarre events described within the *Histories*, the murder of the Lazic king Gubazes at the hands of several of his Roman allies, as well as the subsequent political fallout and the trial of the king's killers. Throughout Agathias's lengthy account of the affair, the themes of pollution, culpability, and contamination loom large over events and are especially prevalent in the opposing speeches that he imagines first for the Lazi, as they decide which course of action to take in response to the king's murder, and second in the speeches for the prosecution and defense in the ensuing trial. Finally, the article explores the use of pollution and purity within Agathias's presentation of non-Roman customs and behavior, focusing especially on his treatment of the Persians and his use of the vocabulary of purity and pollution as a means of drawing attention to religious and cultural differences while also subtly asserting a sense of Roman superiority. The conclusion then takes a step back to consider the broader literary, social, and religious implications of pollution within Agathias's narrative and the extent to which its incorporation into the wider discussion and analysis of the *Histories* can help us understand his approach to writing history, as well as revealing an additional layer of literary skill within the work of a too-often neglected author.

### Butilinus and Leutharis

After a brief summary of the defeat of Teias and the Goths, Agathias begins book 1 of the *Histories* with the invasion of Italy in 553 CE by an army of Franks and Alamanni led by the brothers Butilinus and Leutharis, who belonged to the latter group but enjoyed considerable influence among the Franks and are identified as the leaders of the expedition.<sup>9</sup> Agathias opens with

some background on Frankish culture, expressing a degree of admiration for the Franks based on their apparent adoption of various Roman customs, together with their reputation for strict adherence to orthodox Christian doctrine (1.2.3–4). At the same time, he praises their ability to resolve conflicts when disagreements occur between their kingdoms, suggesting that “they have never yet waged war on each other, nor have they decided to pollute [*μιαίνειν*] their fatherland with the blood of their own people, . . . considering that it is impious and not according to ancestral custom for the common good to be ruined and overturned on account of their private animosity.”<sup>10</sup> The Alamanni, by contrast, are presented as a savage, mongrel rabble (*ξύγκλυδές εἰσιν ἄνθρωποι καὶ μιγάδες*; 1.6.3). Agathias alleges that the Alamanni, unlike the Franks, still cling to pagan practices, especially the blood sacrifice of animals. Although he claims that those who persist in such folly ought to be pitied, he nevertheless goes on to launch a scathing attack on blood sacrifice in general:

ἐγὼ μὲν γὰρ ἡγοῦμαι μηδὲν τι εἶναι τὸ ἡδόμενον βωμοῖς αἵματι μαινομένοις καὶ ζῶων ὀλέθρῳ βιαι-  
οτάτῳ· εἰ δέ γε ἄρα καὶ ὀτιοῦν τὰ τοιάδε προσί-  
εσθαι πέφυκεν, ἀγαθὸν μὲν οὐκ ἂν εἴη οὐδὲ ἡμερον,  
ἀγριον δέ τι ἴσως καὶ μανιώδες, ὅποῖον τὸν Δείμον  
ἀναπλάττουσι μάτην οἱ ποιηταὶ καὶ τὸν Φόβον  
Ἐνυώ τέ τινα καὶ Ἄτην καὶ Ἔριν, ὥς ἂν αὐτοὶ φαίεν,  
τὴν ἀμαιμάκετον· προστίθει δὲ τούτοις, εἰ βούλει,  
καὶ τὸν παρὰ Πέρσαις καλούμενον Ἀρειμάνην καὶ  
τῶν ἄλλων χθονίων φασμάτων ὅποσα κακοῦργα  
καὶ μαιφόμενα.<sup>11</sup>

*Histoire du Bas-Empire*, vol. 2 (Paris, 1949), 605–11; Brodka, *Narses*, 164–99; J. J. Arnold, “The Merovingians and Italy: Ostrogoths and Early Lombards,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Merovingian World*, ed. B. Effros and I. Moreira (Oxford, 2020), 442–60, at 451–54.

<sup>10</sup> Agath. 1.2.5–7 (οὐπώποτε πόλεμον ἤραντο κατ’ ἀλλήλων οὐδὲ αἵματι ἐμφυλίῳ τὴν πατρίδα ἐγνωσαν μαινεῖν . . . ὥς οὐχ ὅσιον ὄν οὐδὲ πάτριον ἰδίας αὐτῶν ἔνεκα δυσμενείας τὰ κοινὰ πημαίνεσθαι καὶ ἀνατε-  
τράφθαι); all citations of Agathias are to R. Keydell, *Agathiae Myrinaei Historiarum Libri Quinque* (Berlin, 1967). Unless otherwise stated, translations throughout are our own. For the broader historiographical context of Agathias's more positive comments on the Franks, see Cameron, “Early Merovingians,” 114–16, 137–38, and S. Lin, “Justinian's Frankish War, 552–ca. 560,” *Studies in Late Antiquity* 5.3 (2021): 403–31, at 411.

<sup>11</sup> Agath. 1.7.5. Procopius (*Wars* 6.26.10), writing several decades earlier, alleges that the Franks were Christian in name only, and that they still maintained many of their traditional religious practices

der Franken und wandernde Pest: Byzantinische Geschichtsschreiber über ‘wahre’ und ‘falsche’ Ursachen von Seuchen,” *Medizinhistorisches Journal* 53.2 (2018): 163–82, at 165–72.

<sup>9</sup> Gregory of Tours, *Hist.* 3.32, 4.9; *PLRE* 3.253–54, s.v. “Butilinus 1”; 3.789–90, s.v. “Leutharis 1”; A. Cameron, “Justin I and Justinian,” in *Late Antiquity: Empire and Successors, AD 425–600*, ed. A. Cameron, B. Ward-Perkins, and M. Whitby, *CAH* 14 (Cambridge, 2000), 63–85, at 75–76. On the campaign more generally, see E. Stein,



For I consider that there exists no being that takes pleasure in altars polluted with blood and the most violent death of animals. But if anything is disposed to welcome such things, it would be neither good nor gentle, but would probably be a savage and maniacal being, of the sort that the poets vainly invent—Terror, Fear, some Enyo, Ate, and Eris “the irresistible,” as they would say. And add to these, if you wish, also the one called Ahriman among the Persians, and all the other chthonic phantoms that are evil-doing and bloodstained.

Pollution (and, in particular, pollution as a result of impious bloodshed) plays a prominent role in his interpretation and his condemnation of such foreign practices and deities. His wording implies that even if such beings did exist, they would be not only evil but also inherently polluted by the blood that is shed in their honor. Agathias’s use of *μιαιφόνος* is significant and needs to be highlighted, as it is a label (with a Homeric pedigree) that we will see employed frequently throughout the *Histories* to condemn those who commit acts of murder, which are also repeatedly described as *μιαιφονία*.<sup>12</sup> The obvious connotations of pollution and the connection to *μίασμα* have been demonstrated by Robert Parker in his extensive study of pollution in early Greek religion; and as we will see in the examples discussed below, this is the sense in which Agathias most commonly uses it.<sup>13</sup>

(including human sacrifice): Leven, “Tollwut,” 169; R. B. Ford, *Rome, China, and the Barbarians: Ethnographic Traditions and the Transformation of Empires* (Cambridge, 2020), 184.

12 Cf. Hom. *Il.* 5.31–35. On Agathias’s broader familiarity with Homer and his use of Homeric language and themes elsewhere in his writing, see G. Viansino, *Agathias Scholasticus, Epigrammi* (Milan, 1967), 14; Cameron, *Agathias*, 25; R. C. McCail, “On the Early Career of Agathias Scholasticus,” *REB* 28 (1970): 141–51, at 147–48.

13 Parker, *Miasma*, 134: “there exists an epithet *miaiphonos* (it is applied to Ares) which means, presumably, ‘one who kills in a polluting way’ and in later texts is applied to the most culpable murderers.” See also E. Carawan, *Rhetoric and the Law of Draco* (Oxford, 2004), 18–19. Procop. *SH* 18.29 brands Justinian as *μιαιφόνος*, referring in the previous paragraph to his love of murder (*μιαιφονία*) and comparing him to the Persian king Chosroes in terms of savagery. Cf. H. Börm, “Der Perserkönig im Imperium Romanum: Chosroes I. und der sassanidische Einfall in das Oströmische Reich 540 n.Chr.,” *Chiron* 36 (2006): 299–328, at 315.

So, while the Franks receive praise for their avoidance of one form of polluting bloodshed, the Alamanni are immediately condemned for another. Agathias defends his judgmental tone by stressing his belief that the goal of writing history is not merely to entertain but also to provide moral instruction (1.7.7).<sup>14</sup> Agathias asserts that proximity to the Franks is beginning to have a beneficial effect on the Alamanni (1.7.2), but his narrative goes on to show that this is a door that swings both ways: the Alamanni have an especially deleterious effect on the Franks, as their leaders make them complicit in their acts of pollution and so doom both groups in the process. However, the crimes of the invaders are not discussed until the start of book 2, at which point Agathias again stresses the orthodoxy of the Franks and tries to use this to distance them from atrocities that he attributes solely to the Alamanni (although at other points in his narrative Agathias typically does not distinguish between the two peoples, referring to the invaders collectively as Franks).<sup>15</sup> The Franks, he claims, showed greater restraint and, in particular, did not take part in the desecration of churches. The Alamanni behaved very differently, looting and profaning spoils taken from the churches and shrines (2.1.6–7).<sup>16</sup> These crimes are combined with more overt acts of bloodshed and pollution that Agathias ties directly to the subsequent misfortunes suffered by the invading army:

τὸ δὲ Ἀλαμανικὸν ἅπαν (ἕτερα γὰρ ἐκείνοις ἐς τοῦτο δοκεῖ) ἐδήρουν τοὺς νεῶς ἀφειδῶς καὶ ἀπηγλάϊζον· πολλὰς μὲν γὰρ κάλπεις ἱεράς, πολλὰ δὲ περιρραντήρια πάγχρυσσα, συχνὰ δὲ κύπελλα καὶ κανᾶ καὶ ὅσα ταῖς μυστικαῖς ἀγιστεταῖς ἀνείται, ταῦτα δὲ ἀφαιρούμενοι ἅπαντα οἰκεῖα κτήματα ἐποιοῦντο. τοῖς δὲ οὐδὲ τάδε ἀπέχρη, ἀλλὰ τὰς τε ὁροφὰς τῶν ἱερῶν ἀνακτόρων κατέβαλλον καὶ τὰς κρηπίδας ἀνεκίνουν· λύθρῳ τε τὰ τεμένη περιερρεῖτο καὶ τὰ λήϊα ἐμιάινετο, πολλοῦ νεκρῶν ἀτάφων περιερριμμένων. ἀλλ’ οὐκ ἐς μακρὰν αὐτοὺς τὰ

14 See S. Costanza, “Orientamenti cristiani della storiografia di Agathias,” *Helikon* 2 (1962): 90–111, at 96; Kaldellis, *Procopius*, 63; Gador-Whyte, “Digressions,” 153–54; M. Jankowiak, “Procopius of Caesarea and His Byzantine Successors,” in *A Companion to Procopius of Caesarea*, ed. M. Meier and F. Montinaro (Leiden, 2021), 231–51, at 236. Cf. Agath. 2.12.5.

15 Brodka, *Narses*, 168.

16 Cameron, “Early Merovingians,” 136–37; Gottlieb, “Die Nachrichten des Agathias,” 151–52; Leven, “Tollwut,” 168–69.

ἐνθένδε μετῆλθε μηνίματα. οἱ μὲν γὰρ πολέμῳ, τὸ δὲ τι αὐτῶν νόσῳ διεφθάρη, καὶ οὐδεὶς ὅστις ἀπάνωτο τῆς προτέρας ἐλπίδος· ἀδικία γὰρ καὶ θεοῦ ἀθεραπευσία φευκτὰ μὲν αἰεὶ καὶ ἀξύμφορα, μάλιστα δὲ ἐν τῷ προσπολεμεῖν καὶ παρατάττεσθαι.<sup>17</sup>

But the entire army of the Alamanni—for their view in this matter was different—plundered the churches without regard and removed their ornaments. They carried off many sacred pitchers, many solid gold purification vessels, numerous chalices, baskets, and whatever items are dedicated to the mystic ceremonies, and they made all of these their personal property. Not even these things were enough for them, but they took down the roofs of the holy shrines and uprooted the foundations. The sanctuaries dripped with gore, and the fields were contaminated, since everywhere unburied corpses had been thrown around. But, not long after this, the resulting blood-guilt overtook them. For some were killed in war, and the rest of them by disease, and there was not one who enjoyed what he had previously hoped for. For injustice and failure to worship God are always to be avoided and are harmful, but especially when making war and drawing up for battle.

The acts of looting and desecration are combined with the staining of sacred spaces through defiling gore (λύθρον), along with the pollution of the surrounding area by unburied corpses.<sup>18</sup> Everything that befalls the invaders from this point on is linked back to their impious and impure behavior. The term *μήνιμα*, while referring to divine retribution, was also traditionally associated with acts of blood-guilt that had resulted in pollution.<sup>19</sup> This was certainly the sense in which Plato used it in the *Phaedrus* (244d–e), where it was discussed in the context of divinely inflicted disease and madness, whose remedy according to Plato was bound

up with acts of purification (καθαρμοί).<sup>20</sup> Agathias points to the fates of Butilinus and Leutharis to illustrate the inevitability of punishment falling upon those who are guilty of wars of aggression and who are driven by greed (2.1.9–10).<sup>21</sup> The brothers divided their forces after they had enjoyed initial success and acquired large quantities of spoils. Leutharis sought to return home with his booty while Butilinus wished to remain in Italy. Both met with disaster, however, and were destroyed by Roman forces, but only after both of their armies had also suffered extensively from sickness and disease and, in the case of Leutharis, an apparently divinely inflicted madness that made his death more terrible.

Leutharis's forces had traveled north, suffering defeats along the way, before eventually reaching Venice, at which point Agathias states the outbreak of disease (νόσος) occurred. He notes the varying explanations that had been suggested for the disease that gripped the enemy forces, such as the bad air in the region and the Franks' inability to cope with the different climate, but ends by dismissing these and asserting that the obvious answer was that their fate was inevitable because of the offense (ἀδικία) they had committed against all things human and divine (2.3.5), clearly referring back to his initial description of the desecration and pollution of sacred spaces.<sup>22</sup> While Agathias asserts that the whole army was eventually wiped out, he dramatizes the death of Leutharis, emphasizing the theme of divinely inflicted madness leading to an especially unclean manner of death:

20 Parker, *Miasma*, 288; W. Burkert, *Greek Religion*, trans. J. Raffan (Cambridge, MA, 1985), 77; G. E. R. Lloyd, *In the Grip of Disease: Studies in the Greek Imagination* (Oxford, 2003), 150–51. For Agathias's likely familiarity with this text from his time studying at Alexandria, see J. D. Frendo, "Agathias' View of the Intellectual Attainments of Khusrau I: A Reconsideration of the Evidence," *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 18 (2004): 97–110, at 101, 107, n. 23. See also Cameron, *Agathias* (n. 1 above), 99.

21 It is tempting to read within Agathias's words a veiled criticism of Justinian's aggressive expeditions that, although lucrative, had produced considerable problems in the following years.

22 Agathias may have modeled the scene on Diodorus Siculus's account (14.70.4–71.4) of the plague that struck down Carthaginian forces after they desecrated a temple of Demeter. He was certainly familiar with Diodorus (cf. Agath. 2.18.5) and was especially indebted to him for his preface: Cameron, *Agathias*, 58, 145. Agathias repeats the idea of the Franks' inability to cope with the Italian climate at 1.19.2.

17 Agath. 2.1.7–9.

18 On the overtones of impurity and defilement attached to the term, see LSJ, s.v. λύθρον; V. Mahieu, "Note sur Jupiter Latiaris et le sacrifice humain," *RBPH* 88.1 (2010): 93–98, at 95. John Malalas (17.16) similarly attributes the infliction of a disease that caused putrefaction in its victims (σηπόμενοι) to divine punishment for theft. See also Theoph. Sim. 3.16.3.

19 LSJ, s.v. μήνιμα. Cf. Eur. *Hipp.* 1379–81; Antiph. 4.2.7–8.

αὐτὸς δὴ οὖν ὁ στρατηγὸς καὶ μάλα ἐνδηλὸς ἦν, ὅτι δὴ αὐτὸν θεήλατοι μετῆλθον ποιναί. παραπλήξ τε γὰρ ἐγεγόνει καὶ ἐλύττα περιφανῶς, καθάπερ οἱ ἔκφρονες καὶ μεμνηνότες, κλόνος τε αὐτὸν ἐπεΐχε μυρίος καὶ οἰμωγὰς ἀφίει βαρείας· καὶ νῦν μὲν πρηνής, νῦν δὲ καὶ ἐπὶ θάτερα ἐν τῷ ἐδάφει κατέπιπτεν, ἀφρῶ τε πολλῷ τὸ στόμα περιερρεῖτο καὶ τῷ ὀφθαλμῷ βλοσυρῷ γε ἦσθιν καὶ παρατετραμμένω. ἐς τοῦτο δὲ ἄρα ὁ δειλαιὸς ἀφίκτο μανίας, ὥστε ἀμέλει καὶ τῶν οἰκείων μελῶν ἀπογεύσασθαι. ἐχόμενος γὰρ ὁδᾶξ τῶν βραχιόνων καὶ διασπῶν τὰς σάρκας κατεβίβρωσκε γε αὐτὰς ὥσπερ θηρίον διαλιχόμενος τὸν ἰχῶρα. οὕτω δὲ ἑαυτοῦ ἐμπιπλάμενος καὶ κατὰ σμικρὸν ὑποφθινύθων οἰκτροτάτα ἀπεβίω.<sup>23</sup>

Indeed, it was very clear that divinely inflicted punishments pursued the general himself. For he became demented and began to be manifestly raving, like those who are out of their senses and mad; an enormous agitation also took hold of him, and he let out deep groans. At one moment he would fall face down on the floor, and at another moment the other way up. And his mouth would be dripping with much foam and his eyes were grim and contorted. And the wretch then reached such a point of madness that he even actually tasted his own limbs. For taking hold of his arms with his teeth and rending the flesh, he devoured them, like a wild animal licking clean a suppurating wound. And thus, eating his fill of himself and gradually wasting away, he died most pitifully.

Butilinus, meanwhile, fared no better in the south, since his forces had also been struck down by disease (νόσος) after being forced to survive solely on grapes because Narses' forces had carried off all other sources of food (2.4.2).<sup>24</sup> Ignoring the warnings of the Alamannic

soothsayers who had cautioned him not to fight, he risked a battle and his army was destroyed. While at first glance this description appears to give the Alamanni's pagan soothsayers a degree of credit for their accurate prediction, Agathias was quick to add his opinion that "a change of the day would surely not have sufficed for them to avoid paying in full the expiation for those deeds that they had sacrilegiously committed" (2.6.7–8).<sup>25</sup>

The account of the fate of Butilinus and Leutharis has played an important role in the wider discourse surrounding Agathias's religious beliefs and general worldview. In particular, the fact that he stresses the orthodox Christianity of the Franks, who nevertheless suffer the same fate as the Alamanni who he claims were solely responsible for the acts of sacrilege, murder, and pollution, has presented something of a conundrum. Averil Cameron views it in the context of a discussion of divine punishment as a consequence of sin, focusing on Agathias's use of ἀδικία (but without mention of his repeated references to pollution). Cameron sees the destruction of the "wholly virtuous" Franks as notable, but judges this attribution of virtue to be a direct consequence of the Franks' situation within the politics of Agathias's own day, when particular emphasis was being placed on their Christianity.<sup>26</sup> Kaldellis focuses on the apparently indiscriminate nature of divine justice within the scene, since it appears to swallow up the innocent and the guilty alike.<sup>27</sup> Michael Whitby is quick to dismiss the acts of desecration (i.e., pollution) by the invaders in favor of Agathias's subsequent claim (2.1.9–10) that the Franks had been punished primarily because of "the act of unwarranted aggression" that the campaign represented.<sup>28</sup> However, given the significance of pollution not only within Agathias's account of

25 οὐ γὰρ δὴ που ἡ τῆς ἡμέρας ἐναλλαγὴ ἀπέχρησεν ἂν αὐτοῖς ἐς τὸ μὴ οὐχὶ ποινὰς ἀποτίσαι ὧν ἐτύγχανον ἡσεβηκότες. Agathias also voices skepticism toward such practices at 2.15.12.

26 Cameron, "Early Merovingians," 136–39. See also Cameron, "The 'Scepticism' of Procopius" (n. 1 above), 479, and Cameron, *Agathias*, 54–55, 94, 120. For objections to this interpretation, see A. Kaldellis, *Ethnography After Antiquity: Foreign Lands and Peoples in Byzantine Literature* (Philadelphia, 2013), 194.

27 Kaldellis, "The Historical and Religious Views of Agathias" (n. 1 above), 214–15. More recently, Brodka, *Narses*, 169, has dismissed attempts to interpret Agathias's words as seeking to distance the Franks from responsibility at the expense of the Alamanni alone.

28 Whitby, "Religious Views" (n. 1 above), 88. At 2.9.12, however, Agathias attributes the divine punishment inflicted upon the Franks specifically to their crimes (ἀδικήματα), not their aggressive intentions.

23 Agath. 2.3.6–7. Kaldellis, "Things Are Not What They Are" (n. 3 above), 297, suggests that this scene is a fabrication on Agathias's part, blending Leutharis's death from disease with the myth of Erysichthon, who also devoured himself after being punished for an act of desecration (Ov. *Met.* 8.724–878). See also A. Alexakis, "Two Verses of Ovid Liberally Translated by Agathias of Myrina (*Metamorphoses* 8.877–78 and *Historiae* 2.3.7)," *BZ* 101 (2008): 609–16.

24 See Leven, "Tollwut," 171–72. See also Stein, *Histoire* (n. 9 above), 607–8.

these events but also across the *Histories* more generally, we cannot discount so easily his framing of the blood-stained and polluted manner in which the invaders conducted their campaign. Moreover, by focusing on pollution—the concept that Agathias was clearly using—rather than sin, it may be possible to square the circle of the “innocent” Franks’ destruction alongside that of the “guilty” Alamanni, because pollution always brings with it the threat of contamination—and therein lies its greatest danger.<sup>29</sup> As we will see, pollution in the *Histories* is repeatedly presented as something that threatens to overtake not only those who commit or assist in acts of wickedness but also those who knowingly stand idly by and let them happen. Such groups or individuals become complicit and thus contaminated in the process. In such circumstances, the inherent dangers associated with pollution threaten to overtake all those in the vicinity, especially in cases in which the punishment takes the form of a fatally infectious disease (a point that likely held even greater significance for Agathias and his contemporary audience, who were living in a time of unprecedented plague).

### Narses

One of the strongest arguments for reading a greater degree of significance into Agathias’s use of pollution in his description of the Franks’ invasion and subsequent destruction is his presentation of the Roman general Narses within his account of that same campaign. While Butilinus and Leutharis oversee an army polluted by wanton slaughter and sacrilege, Agathias is careful to portray Narses as a paragon not only of virtue, discipline, and manliness but also, crucially, of purity. Moreover, just as the pollution of Butilinus and Leutharis plays a central role in their downfall, so Narses’ care to avoid actions that would incur pollution is used to explain his victories.<sup>30</sup> This is first demonstrated by Narses’ behavior during the siege of Lucca, following his speedy and generally successful moves to secure the loyalty of strategic strongpoints around

Tuscany. Only Lucca refused to open its doors to the Roman forces, despite having previously given Narses hostages and swearing to surrender after thirty days if no relief came from the Franks (1.12.1–2). After the thirty days elapsed and no surrender was forthcoming, Narses faced calls from his officers to execute the hostages. However, Agathias claims that Narses, “for he did everything with judgment and did not yield too much to anger, did not reach such a point of cruelty as to kill those who had done no injustice in reprisal for the mistakes that others made, but still devised a stratagem of the following sort” (1.12.3–4).<sup>31</sup> Narses attempted instead to trick the townsfolk by staging a fake execution of the hostages, which caused the populace to lament and hurl abuse at him from the ramparts, rejecting his claims of piety and instead branding him a polluted killer (μιαιφόνος):

καὶ δὴ τῷ Ναρσῇ ἅπαντες ἀναφανδὸν ἐλοιδοροῦντο ἀλαζόνα τε ἀποκαλοῦντες καὶ ἀτάσθαλον καὶ ἔργῳ μὲν αὐτὸν εἶναι λέγοντες βίαιόν τε καὶ μιαυφόνον, τὴν δὲ τοῦ εὐσεβεῖν αἰεὶ καὶ τὸ θεῖον θεραπεύειν δόξαν ἄλλως αὐτῷ κεκομψεύσθαι.<sup>32</sup>

Everyone therefore began to abuse Narses publicly, calling him boastful and arrogant, and saying that he was in fact violent and blood-stained, and that it was in vain that he had boasted of a reputation for being always pious and venerating the divine.

The whole point behind the account of this abuse is, of course, that Narses had not committed the outrage. Such an action would have been unthinkable for the Narses of Agathias’s *Histories* and completely contrary to his portrayal. When the deception was revealed and the hostages released back into the town unscathed, the populace rejoiced and their opinion of Narses was said to have been greatly improved (although not enough to secure their immediate surrender).<sup>33</sup>

29 See Parker, *Miasma*, 4.

30 For Narses’ pious conduct, see also Evagrius 4.24. More generally, see M. E. Stewart, “The *Andreios* Eunuch-Commander Narses: Sign of a Decoupling of Martial Virtues and Masculinity in the Early Byzantine Empire?,” *Cerae* 2 (2015): 1–25; S. Tougher, *The Roman Castrati: Eunuchs in the Roman Empire* (London, 2021), 119–35.

31 . . . γνώμη γὰρ ἅπαντα ἔπρασσε καὶ οὐ λίαν τῇ ὀργῇ ξυνεχώρει, οὐκ ἐς τὸδε ὀμότητος ἦει, ὡς ἀποκτεῖναι τοὺς μὴδὲν ὅ τι ἡδικηκότας, ἀνθ’ ὧν ἕτεροι ἐπλημμέλουν, δόλον δὲ ὅμως τοιόνδε τινὰ ἐμηχανᾶτο.

32 Agath. 1.12.9.

33 D. DeForest, “Agathias on Italy, Italians and the Gothic War,” *Estudios bizantinos* 8 (2020): 61–81, at 69–70.



Narses' devotion to purity next plays an important role during the buildup to the Romans' decisive battle against the forces of Butilinus, who were already suffering from the sickness that was framed as just punishment for the criminal acts of pollution discussed above. The role of impiety and disease in Agathias's discussion of the barbarian host makes his characterization of Narses all the more striking and invites the comparison. As Narses was preparing for the battle, he learned that one of the Herul chiefs within his force had unjustly murdered a servant. Agathias claims that Narses immediately paused his plans, judging that it would be impious (οὐχ ὀσιον) to undertake a battle "before removing the stain and purifying the pollution" (πρὶν ἀπολυμῆναι καὶ ἀφαγνίσαι τὸ μίasma; 2.7.2).<sup>34</sup> After investigating the matter and receiving a haughty and impertinent response from the Herul chieftain, Narses ordered the man's immediate execution, causing outrage among the Herul troops, who threatened to withdraw from the battle. Narses stood firm, however, and confidently proceeded with preparations for the battle:

ὁ δὲ Ναρσῆς οὕτω πως τὸ τῆς μαιφονίας ἄγος ἀποδιοπομπησάμενος καὶ τῶν Ἑρούλων ὀλίγα φροντίσας ἐχώρει ἀνὰ τὴν παράταξιν, ἀνειπὼν ἐν κοινῷ καὶ ἀναβόησας, ὡς ὁ γε βουλόμενος τῆς νίκης μεταλαχεῖν ξυνεπέσθω.<sup>35</sup>

But Narses thus, I suppose, removed the pollution of bloodshed and, giving little thought to the Heruls, went along the battle line; he made a public announcement, shouting that whoever wished to have a share of the victory should accompany him.

As Parker has observed, ἄγος plays a central role within the wider discourse of pollution. It contains significant overlap with the concept of μίasma, referring to metaphysical pollution caused by offenses committed by mortals "against the gods or their rules" that lead to

divine retribution.<sup>36</sup> It may also involve acts that cause μίasma to be brought into contact with the sacred.<sup>37</sup> Agathias's understanding of the overlap between the two concepts is clear. Rather than seeking merely to enforce justice, Narses appears to have the threat of pollution in mind when ordering the execution. He is able to begin the battle with confidence only once it is clear that the Roman forces are no longer at risk from the ἄγος that was incurred by their Herul ally.<sup>38</sup> Indeed, his confidence was such that Agathias says he was willing to engage the enemy without the outraged Herul forces if necessary. Although Narses and the rest of his troops are blameless in terms of the killing, Agathias's phrasing implies that if the offender had not been punished and had remained within the army, the whole force risked pollution and possibly destruction as a result, just as the Franks were destroyed through the acts of pollution committed by their Alamanni allies despite their allegedly having taken no part in the acts of murder and desecration of churches. Agathias presents the scale of the defeat suffered by Butilinus, the Franks, and those Heruls who had deserted to their side (and so also became complicit) as clear proof that this was divine punishment for their actions (2.9.12). He lingers on the scale of the defeat suffered by Butilinus and his forces, recalling that while the Romans buried their own troops according to their established customs, they stripped the enemy of booty and weapons, leaving the area surrounding Capua littered with corpses. However, this is not presented in terms of a pollution of the landscape as it was in his earlier description of the Alamanni's acts of slaughter. Instead, it is part of the glorious Roman victory.<sup>39</sup> Agathias takes the time to record a gloating

36 Cf. Procop. *SH* 1.27, which uses both terms in reference to the actions of Antonina and her servant Eugenius.

37 Parker, *Miasma*, 8: "Every *agos* is probably also a *miasma*, and *agos* is often constructed as though it meant pollution rather than something like 'avenging divine power'"; A. Petrovic and I. Petrovic, *Inner Purity and Pollution in Greek Religion*, vol. 1, *Early Greek Religion* (Oxford, 2016), 20–21, 29–32. See also Greatrex, *Procopius of Caesarea* (n. 7 above), 338.

38 R. C. McCail, "Erysichthon, Sin, and Autophagy," *Mnemosyne* 17.2 (1964): 162, is one of the few sources to stress the role of pollution and "blood-guilt" within this passage and to point out Agathias's deliberate contrasting of Narses' actions with those of the Alamanni leaders, especially Leutharis, whom he notes suffered the more unclean manner of death.

39 Maurice (*Strat.* 7.6) recommends the burial of Roman troops on both religious and practical grounds, but later in the same work

34 Frendo's preferred translation—"without first removing the guilty stain by some act of atonement"—is too vague in this context and glosses over the heavy connotations of both pollution and purification that Agathias was clearly seeking to evoke: J. D. Frendo, *Agathias: The Histories* (Berlin, 1975), 39.

35 Agath. 2.7.5. Both Lys. 6.53 and Pl. *Leg.* 877c use ἀποδιοπομπέομαι in combination with καθαίρω to refer to the cleansing of religious pollution.

poem said to have been inscribed on a stone in the region, boasting that after the battle the nearby river was crammed with Frankish bodies and its “happy waters” reddened with barbarian blood (2.10.8). Apparently, for Agathias bodies amassed in the cause of Roman victory were not thought to have posed the same danger.<sup>40</sup>

Agathias offers one last example of Narses’ upright behavior, contrasted with that of a non-Roman enemy, which again demonstrates the divine justice that falls upon the wicked. This concerns the actions of Ragnaris, a Gothic commander (possibly of Hunnic origin), who had consolidated the remaining Gothic forces in the aftermath of Teias’s defeat and seized the Italian town of Compsa (2.13.2–3).<sup>41</sup> Narses placed the town under siege and eventually entered into negotiations with Ragnaris, who conducted himself in a haughty manner similar to that of the guilty Herul leader, prompting Narses to call off the talks. As he was returning to the town, Ragnaris treacherously shot an arrow at Narses, but he missed and was then mortally wounded by one of Narses’ own guards. He took days to die from the wound. Agathias judges this outcome to be appropriate for such a foul act of treachery (2.14.2–5). Ragnaris’s death brought about the immediate surrender of the town by the Goths, once they had assurances from Narses that he would put none of them to death. Agathias concludes by observing that “Narses killed none of them, since he had sworn this, and besides, since it was impious to lay hands most cruelly on those who had been defeated; but so that they would not revolt again, he dispatched them all to the emperor in Byzantium.”<sup>42</sup> In this final assessment, Agathias may have had in mind Ragnaris’s earlier appearance within

Procopius’s *Wars* (8.34.9–15), when the barbarian’s treachery was once again displayed through his willingness to resort to just such an act of deception, which led to his carrying out the cold-blooded murder of fifty unarmed Roman hostages.<sup>43</sup> As ever, Narses is shown to be the greater man through his adherence to divine law, avoidance of pollution, and unwillingness to shed blood without just cause, and therefore he and the Romans under his command continue to prosper.

## The Murder of Gubazes

The next case in Agathias’s narrative in which pollution plays a pivotal role concerns the intrigues within the court of the Lazic king Gubazes. These culminated in the king’s assassination in 555 CE at the hands of several high-profile Roman officials, who formed a small but determined conspiracy against him. Tensions had been rising steadily between the king and his Roman allies owing to the drawn-out hostilities in the region against Persia. In particular, Gubazes displayed increasing exasperation at what he saw as the failures and incompetence of the Roman high command, especially the generals Bessas and Martin, as well as the *sacellarius* Rusticus. Eventually Gubazes complained directly to Justinian, who removed Bessas and reluctantly left Martin in sole command (3.2.3–8), at which point the plot was hatched at the instigation of Martin, Rusticus, and his brother Ioannes.<sup>44</sup> These men denounced Gubazes to Justinian, alleging that the Lazi were in communication with the Persians and were preparing once again to change allegiances.<sup>45</sup> Justinian ordered Gubazes

(8.1.16) he encourages—without any apparent signs of religious scruples—the deliberate exposure of enemy corpses without burial to sap adversaries’ morale. Cf. Theoph. Sim. 3.7.19.

<sup>40</sup> Irmscher, “Zur Weltanschauung des Agathias” (n. 4 above), 49. Cf. J. J. Lennon, *Pollution and Religion in Ancient Rome* (Cambridge, 2014), 120, which discusses Florus’s description (1.38) of Marius’s victory over the Cimbri and the subsequent consumption of barbarian blood by Roman troops when they drank from the nearby river (and the lack of pollution within the account): “In times of war the victory of Rome appears to have superseded all other concerns.”

<sup>41</sup> Agath. 2.13.2–3. For the origins and career of Ragnaris, see *PLRE* 3.1076, s.v. “Ragnaris.”

<sup>42</sup> Agath. 2.14.7: *Ναρσῆς δὲ ἀπέκτεινε μὲν οὐδένα τῶ ταῦτά τε ὁμωμοκέναι καὶ ἄλλως οὐχ ὅσιν εἶναι τοὺς ἡσσημένους ὠμότατα διαχειρίζεσθαι, ὥς ἂν δὲ μὴ αὐθις νεωτερίσαιεν, ἅπαντας ὡς βασιλέα ἐς τὸ Βυζάντιον ἔστειλεν.*

<sup>43</sup> See A. J. Kosto, “The Transformation of Hostageship in Late Antiquity,” *AntTard* 21 (2013): 265–82, at 277.

<sup>44</sup> Stein, *Histoire* (n. 9 above), 513–14, 811–12; Cameron, *Agathias* (n. 1 above), 92–93; D. Braund, *Georgia in Antiquity: A History of Colchis and Transcaucasian Iberia, 550 BC–AD 562* (Oxford, 1994), 307–9; J. A. S. Evans, *The Age of Justinian: The Circumstances of Imperial Power* (London, 1996), 167–68; A. D. Lee, “Abduction and Assassination: The Clandestine Face of Roman Diplomacy in Late Antiquity,” *International History Review* 31.1 (2009): 1–23, at 11; P. Heather, *Rome Resurgent: War and Empire in the Age of Justinian* (Oxford, 2018), 231–32; *PLRE* 3.559–60, s.v. “Gubazes.”

<sup>45</sup> Agathias (3.3.2) suggests that Ioannes privately told Justinian that Gubazes had already defected. Given the previous vacillation of the Lazi between the Romans and the Persians (Procop. *Wars* 2.17.2), which had in the past depended entirely on immediate political circumstances, the possibility that the king might have switched sides again must have been a genuine concern for Justinian. Procopius

to come to Constantinople to answer the charge; but when Ioannes questioned the emperor about what they should do in various—and deliberately ambivalent—hypothetical scenarios, Justinian conceded that if Gubazes refused to come he should be treated as an enemy (3.3.3–6). Armed with this ambiguous instruction, the conspirators met with Gubazes, ostensibly to discuss their strategy for an attack on Onoguris but instead using the opportunity to murder the king when he refused to offer assistance until the Romans had proven themselves capable and thus had made up for their recent failures. Those Romans who were ignorant of the plot did not challenge the act because they believed it had been carried out on Justinian's orders. Meanwhile, the outraged Lazi withdrew all support from the Romans (3.4.1–8).

The fallout from the murder of Gubazes is discussed at great length by Agathias, with pollution language and imagery featuring prominently throughout. Such language first appears immediately after the king's death with the preparations for the attack on Onoguris, when Agathias states that “the ones who had plotted the act of pollution” (οἱ . . . τοῦ μιάσματος βουληφόροι) were especially keen to win a quick victory, if only to mollify the emperor's potential anger when he learned of their actions (3.5.8).<sup>46</sup> After receiving intelligence that the Persians had dispatched a relief force to support the town, the Roman commander Buzes advised the more prudent strategy of attacking these troops first, while they were still on the march. However, his proposal was ridiculed and opposed by Rusticus, whose involvement seems to contradict Agathias's claim that he was not there in a military capacity.<sup>47</sup> Rusticus demanded the speedy subjugation of the town before the relief force had time to arrive (3.6.1–7). Agathias is clear in his judgment that the plan proposed by Buzes was superior but that by this point the murderers' act of pollution had sealed the fate of their entire force:

ἐπεὶ δέ, ὡς ἔοικεν, ἅπαντα ἡ πλῆθὺς τοῦ ἄγους μετελήφει τῷ ξυνεῖναι τε καὶ ἔπεσθαι τοῖς μαιφόνοις, ἡ

κακίων τε καὶ ἀξύμφορος νενίκηκε γνώμη, ὡς ἂν παραχρήμα ὑπόσχοιεν δίκας.<sup>48</sup>

But since (as it appears) the whole host had had a share in the pollution, both by being with and by following the bloodstained men, the worse, useless opinion won, so that they might instantly pay the penalty.

Again, we see the power of pollution not only to bring divine punishment down upon the perpetrators but also to contaminate those around them, with disastrous results. For Agathias this outcome is presented as clear proof that divine punishment (μῆνιμα) had again followed unholy (ἄνόσιος) bloodshed (3.8.2), overtaking the Roman army, which suffered a crushing defeat despite superior numbers. Agathias emphasizes that there were degrees of culpability, however, by adding that those men who were directly responsible for the act of bloodshed (μυαιφονία) were soon punished to the full (3.8.3). What follows in Agathias's narrative is a series of imagined deliberations among the Lazi, who gather together to consider how to respond to the murder of their king. It shows Agathias at his most inventive and also provided him with an opportunity to make use of his years of training in legal oratory.<sup>49</sup> Two speeches are offered at this meeting: the first by one Aeetes, who argues in favor of joining forces with the Persians, and the second by Phartazes, who urges the Lazi to maintain their loyalty to the Romans and not blame them all for the actions of a few.<sup>50</sup> Despite their conflicting aims, both speeches refer to the crime and the culprits in terms of pollution and, yet again, raise the potential for contamination in the process.

Aeetes is presented as duplicitous both in his motives and in his oratory. Agathias describes his style as resembling that of a populist harangue by a demagogue (3.8.8), yet this speech also reveals the historian's awareness of the abuses to which the Lazi had been subjected by the Romans in the past. Agathias follows Procopius's example by placing criticism of Justinian

(*Wars* 8.16.27–29) implies that the king had already received overtures from the Persians in 551 CE.

46 See Cameron, *Agathias*, 53.

47 On Rusticus's rank and position, see *PLRE* 3.1103–4, s.v. “Rusticus 4.”

48 Agath. 3.6.8.

49 B. Rubin, *Das Zeitalter Iustinians*, vol. 1 (Berlin, 1960), 361–62.

50 The entire scene is fictional, and Agathias's use of the name Aeetes a likely nod to the mythical king of the Colchians, who were said to live in the same region as the Lazi. See Kaldellis, “Things Are Not What They Are” (n. 3 above), 297–98.

and his followers into the mouth of a barbarian who has already been cast in a negative light.<sup>51</sup> The emperor's meddlesome and unpredictable nature is recalled and given as the explanation for the suddenness with which the murder (μυαιφονία) was committed by subjects eager to carry out his orders (3.9.6). Recalling the Romans' recent humiliation in their failed siege of Onoguris, Aetetes argues that this demonstrates not only incompetence and cowardice but also their innate impiety and polluted status:

τούτου δὲ τὸ μὲν ἐμφανὲς καὶ προχειρότατον αἴτιον ἀνανδρίαν εἶποι τις ἂν καὶ τὸ μὴ τὰ προσήκοντα βεβουλεῦσθαι. πρόσεστι γὰρ αὐτοῖς ὡς ἀληθῶς καθάπερ οἰκεία καὶ συγγενῇ καὶ τὰ τοιαῦτα ὀνειδή- πλην ἄλλα τοῖς ἐκ φύσεως μοχθηροῖς τὸ αὐθαίρετον ἀδίκημα προστεθὲν ἐδιπλασίασεν αὐτοῖς τὸ ἀτύχημα τῆς τοῦ κρείττονος προμηθείας διὰ τὸ ἄγος ἐκπεπτωκόσιν. τὸ γὰρ νικᾶν οὐχ οὕτω τοῖς ὅπλοις, ὅσον τῷ εὐσεβεῖ βεβαιούται· καὶ οὐκ ἂν ποτε μετεῖναι φῆσαιμι τῆς τοῦ ἀγαθοῦ συμμαχίας πονηροῖς ἀνδράσι καὶ μιαρωτάτοις. τούτοις οὖν, εἴπερ εὖ φρονούμεν, οὐ προσεκτέον, οἷς οὔτε τὰ τῆς γνώμης ἄριστα σύγκειται καὶ τὸ σῶζειν ἅπαντα πεφυκὸς νεμεσᾷ.<sup>52</sup>

One might say that the manifest and most obvious cause of this was cowardice and the fact that they had not made appropriate decisions. For they have such reproachful qualities, as though they are truly innate and natural. Nevertheless, the deliberate injustice that added to their natural bad qualities doubled their misfortune, which came from the Almighty's prudence, when they were overthrown because of their pollution. For victory is secured not so much by arms as by piety; and I should say that men who are worthless and utterly bloodstained never have a share in the Good's alliance. Therefore, if we are truly wise, we should pay no attention to these men, in whom the best elements of good judgment are not compounded and against whom that being which naturally saves all things feels resentment.

Aetetes continues to refer to the seriousness of the killing (μυαιφονία) and urges the expulsion of the Romans from their land, warning the Lazi that they must not fear being branded as deserters if the alternative is to miss the chance to avenge Gubazes and cause the Lazi to take on a share of the Romans' pollution in the process (μεθέξομεν τοῦ μιάσματος; 3.10.9). Agathias's language and reasoning, in terms both of unlawful murder as a source of pollution and of its contaminating potential, are entirely in keeping with what has come before in his account of the downfall of the Franks and in the enduring success of the Romans under Narses, whose piety and purity give those under his command a share in victory rather than pollution. It is only the speaker, Aetetes, who is presented as being disingenuous in his aims and flawed in his argument; pollution remains a pivotal point of concern within the narrative.<sup>53</sup> His misplaced trust in the Persians and unfocused hatred of the Romans are rebuked by Phartazes, who acknowledges that the murder (μυαιφονία) was terrible and adds that he regards as accursed (κατάρατοι) and evil (κακοδαίμονες) not only those who killed the king but also those who could have prevented the murder but did not (3.11.8–9).<sup>54</sup> Above all, he stresses that the plot was confined to a closed circle and so at that point culpability lies with those men only. Rather than resort to any rash action, he encourages the Lazi to remain loyal and appeal first to Justinian for justice. As they had hoped, Justinian did order a full inquiry and dispatched the prominent senator Athanasius to oversee proceedings.

Upon Athanasius's arrival, Rusticus and Ioannes were arrested (despite Ioannes' attempt to flee), with Agathias adding that it had been Ioannes who had first deceived the emperor about Gubazes, before committing the act of pollution (μίασμα) with his own hand (3.14.5). Agathias resumes his narrative of the trial at the start of book 4 and again uses this setting to provide speeches from both sides. The historian imagines a full Roman court, of the kind seen in Constantinople, on display to demonstrate to the Lazi the full majesty of Roman justice in action (4.1.8).<sup>55</sup> The trial begins

53 Cf. Cameron, *Agathias*, 127–28.

54 Phartazes refers to the act itself as κακοδαίμωνία at Agath. 3.12.7.

55 T. Sizgorich, "Reasoned Violence and Shifty Frontiers: Shared Victory in the Late Roman East," in *Violence in Late Antiquity: Perceptions and Practices*, ed. H. A. Drake et al. (Aldershot, 2006), 167–76, esp. 167–70; C. Ando, "Performing Justice in Republican Empire,"

51 E.g., Procop. *Wars* 2.2.4–11, 2.3.32–53. See also Ford, *Rome, China, and the Barbarians* (n. 11 above), 174–75.

52 Agath. 3.10.1–2.



with the reading of the letter in which Justinian stated that Gubazes should be killed only if he offered violent opposition when summoned, a response that would indicate clear guilt. If that happened, the letter confirmed that his killer would not be considered polluted by the act of bloodshed (μυιφόνος), but rather would be praised as a tyrannicide (τυραννοκτόνος; 4.2.6), once again highlighting the distinction between justifiable and unjustifiable homicide in terms of the acts' potential to cause pollution.<sup>56</sup> In their attacks upon Rusticus and Ioannes the prosecutors refer to each of them from the start as μυιφόνος, but also try to separate them from the rest of the Roman populace by suggesting that they are unworthy of the name of Romans or of the indulgence that this name might otherwise bring (4.4.1).<sup>57</sup> Seeking to refute the murderers' assertion that the killing of a traitor is inconsequential and may even have a salutary effect on one's allies, they stress that if such a murder is carried out without evidence that can be produced for all to see, the benefit is lost and that, moreover, many others would turn away from their alliances with the Romans if they were associated with such an act of pollution (μίασμα; 4.5.3). Yet following the same line of reasoning as Phartazes, the prosecutors are careful to distance the Roman state from the polluting actions of Rusticus and Ioannes, and Athanasius is addressed directly in the following terms:

ἀλλ' οὔτε μετελήφατε τοῦ βουλευματος οὔτε τὸ  
τούτοις ἰδίᾳ προσκείμενον ἄγος ἐπὶ τὸ σύμπαν τῶν  
Ῥωμαίων ἔθνος ἀναδραμεῖται οὔτε τὴν πάλαι περὶ  
ὑμῶν κρατήσασαν δόξαν, ὡς ἄρα πιστοὶ τὰ ἡθὴ καὶ

in *Legal Engagement: The Reception of Roman Law and Tribunals by Jews and Other Inhabitants of the Empire*, ed. K. Berthelot, N. B. Dohrmann, and C. Nemo-Pekelman (Rome, 2021), 69–85, at 71–73, 81–82.

56 The distinction between forms of homicide that resulted in pollution and those justifiable forms of homicide that did not was well established: Pl. *Leg.* 868b–c, 869c–d, 874b–d; *Euthyd.* 4b–c; Lycurg. *Leoc.* 125; Dem. 9.44, 23.53–55, 60; RO 79.7–11; Parker, *Miasma* (n. 8 above), 366–69; A. Tzanetou, *City of Suppliants: Tragedy and the Athenian Empire* (Austin, 2012), 112–13; F. Meinel, *Pollution and Crisis in Greek Tragedy* (Cambridge, 2015), 115; Petrovic and Petrovic, *Inner Purity* (n. 37 above), 160. Cf. A. Bendlin, “Purity and Pollution,” in *A Companion to Greek Religion*, ed. D. Ogden (Oxford, 2007), 178–89, esp. 185.

57 D. Parnell, *Justinian's Men: Careers and Relationships of Byzantine Army Officers, 518–610* (London, 2016), 46, 191.

βέβαιοι καθεστήκατε καὶ δίκαιοις χρῆσθε νομίμοις,  
ἢ τούτων νικήσει κακοδαιμονία.<sup>58</sup>

But you did not participate in the plan, nor will the entire Roman people make restitution for the pollution that lies on these men personally, nor will the possession of these men by an evil spirit overcome your reputation that is long established—namely, that you have been trustworthy and steadfast in your character, and that you make use of just laws.

Again, we see Agathias's use of ἄγος in reference to a crime that can pollute not only the culprits but also those around them if they allow themselves to become complicit through inaction. The implication here is that the Romans' and Athanasius's ignorance of the crime offers some protection, but that the trial itself is what will ensure that they suffer no harm as a result of the murderers' actions. Much like Narses' evenhanded questioning and subsequent punishment of his Herul commander, the trial is part of the process by which the Roman state will be protected as it moves to restore justice and harmony within its borders (cf. 4.5.5). Before the trial, when Martin and Rusticus still held influence and were playing a pivotal role in the military operations around Onoguris, the Romans were seemingly doomed to suffer reversals. The Romans in the audience, therefore, are assured of their blamelessness and freedom from complicity in the murder that would have otherwise made them ἐναγής. Rusticus and Ioannes, by contrast, are condemned as disgusting (βδελυρός) and reviled (κατάπτυστος) for their role in the killing (μυιφονία; 4.6.3–4).

When the time comes for Rusticus and Ioannes to defend themselves, in refuting the charge they also speak in terms of pollution. They acknowledge that they should definitely be regarded as μυιφόνοι if—and only if—the man they killed had been a loyal subject:

εἰ μὲν οὖν τοιοῦτον ἀπεκτόναμεν ἄνδρα, παράνομα  
τετολμήκαμεν, ἔνδικος ἡ κατηγορία, εἰκότως βίαιοι  
καὶ ἀλαζόνες καὶ μυιφόνοι παρὰ τῶν Κόλχων  
ὀνομαζόμεθα.<sup>59</sup>

58 Agath. 4.5.4.

59 Agath. 4.7.8.

So, if we killed a man of this sort, we have boldly done transgressive acts, the accusation is legitimate, and we are rightly being called violent, boastful, and bloodstained by the Colchians.

However, they maintain that this was not the case with Gubazes. Summing up the rebukes of their accusers, they seek to dismiss the language that has been used against them as hyperbolic and more appropriate to tragedy, and in this example Frendo's translation is particularly illustrative of the misleading approach that has previously been taken regarding Agathias's use of pollution: "Now our accusers may cry shame [μίασμα], infamy [ἄγος] and murder [μυαιφονία] until they burst" (4.8.1).<sup>60</sup> Not only are "shame" and "infamy" entirely inadequate for rendering *μίασμα* and *ἄγος*, they are especially misleading in this context, since they mask the prominent role of pollution within every component of this calculated rhetorical flourish, which must also be understood within the broader context of Agathias's use of pollution throughout the *Histories*. Agathias's combination of these terms also highlights his association of murder, when it is *μυαιφονία*, with those forms of killing that incur pollution (and we have already seen just how frequently the term is deployed). Rusticus continues with this tactic of trying to refute the charge of pollution, referring to brutal forms of corporal and capital punishment that could be seen on display in any city of the empire on any given day. He argues that spectators viewing such atrocities nevertheless appreciate the scale of the crimes that those suffering them have committed, and therefore they do not abuse and revile those tasked with administering the punishments, "calling them accursed, polluted, and possessed by an evil spirit" (ἐναγείς αὐτοὺς καὶ μυαροὺς καὶ κακοδαίμονας ἀποκαλοῦντες; 4.8.2).<sup>61</sup> In addition to arguing that Gubazes' death was justifiable and, therefore, did not result in pollution, Rusticus goes further by trying to claim that the king's immediate death was the only way to prevent escalating acts of sedition and even greater levels of murder (φόνος; 4.9.10). In this way, he attempts to present their actions as serving to keep bloodshed to a minimum and so to turn the accusers' words back against them, a standard oratorical tactic in which

Agathias would surely have been trained from his time in the law courts of Constantinople. The speech closes with Rusticus repeating the claim that he and Ioannes remained loyal to Justinian, even if they were disgusting (βδελυρός) and abhorrent (κατάπτυστος) in the eyes of the Lazi, and stressing that their actions were carried out with the full knowledge and support of Martin (4.10.6).

Ultimately, the arguments of the defendants were unsuccessful. Athanasius judged the death of Gubazes to have been unlawful, and both Rusticus and Ioannes were paraded publicly before being beheaded (4.11.3–4). Although Rusticus had named Martin as an accomplice, his involvement was not proven beyond all doubt and, owing to his seniority, Athanasius referred the matter to the emperor. Agathias implies that Justinian opted to keep Martin in command for a time because the situation in the region remained unstable and because Martin enjoyed popular support within the army.<sup>62</sup> Only after the region had been pacified did he punish Martin—and even then, he merely forced him to retire into private life, rather than ordering him to be executed as he had Rusticus and Ioannes (4.21.1–3).<sup>63</sup> The account of this decision by Justinian is curious and may contain a degree of hidden rebuke toward the emperor. Agathias suggests that Justinian decided not to follow the letter of the law and execute Martin largely because of the general's former victories, judging that forcing Martin into retirement was sufficient punishment, "even if he had had a share in so great a pollution" (εἰ καὶ τοσούτου μιάσματος μετελήγει; 4.21.3). This is unusual in that it presents Justinian as the weak link in the chain of Roman justice. By his decision, Justinian deviates from the course set down by the proper Roman court overseen by Athanasius, who was unaware of the plot and applies the law rigorously and fairly and who the Lazi claim will thus have no share in the *ἄγος* that attaches itself to the perpetrators. Agathias's phrasing recalls the warning of Aeetes to the Lazi at 3.10.9, urging them not to risk becoming complicit in the murder of Gubazes by failing to punish the guilty and warning them that if they do they risk taking on a share of the pollution (μεθέξομεν τοῦ μιάσματος). Aeetes' opponent Phartazes had also urged the Lazi to regard as accursed those who could have done

60 Trans. Frendo, *Agathias* (n. 34 above).

61 Rather than "polluted killers," Frendo (*Agathias*, 109) offers "savage brutes" for *μυαροί*.

62 W. E. Kaegi, *Byzantine Military Unrest, 471–843: An Interpretation* (Amsterdam, 1981), 58–59.

63 *PLRE* 3.847–8, s.v. "Martinus 2."

something but chose not to act. Although Justinian was acting after the fact, Agathias presents him as fully cognizant of Martin's guilt, which he takes for granted; but the emperor chooses not to apply the full penalty as justice demanded (and as Athanasius had done). As a result, he risks becoming caught up in the pollution himself.<sup>64</sup> Justinian's behavior appears in stark contrast to that of Athanasius and Narses, both of whom oversee the just punishment of those in their power, maintaining both their own purity and the Romans' prosperity in the process.<sup>65</sup> When it is the emperor who fails in this regard, the whole state may be put at risk and its commitment to justice called into question.

The entire narrative surrounding the death of Gubazes is framed in terms of pollution, contamination, and retribution upon the guilty. But Agathias breaks off in the middle of his account of these intrigues to relate another event that occurred in the region: a revolt by the Misimians that led to the murder of a Roman force led by the general Soterichus, which triggered brutal reprisals from the Romans.<sup>66</sup> Once again, pollution followed by divine retribution plays a role within the account, but in this instance they fall upon both sides, each being brought down because of their own actions. Soterichus had initially been sent with a force to oversee the installation of Gubazes' brother Tzathes on the throne (3.15.2–5). Once this task was completed, Soterichus proceeded with the rest of his mission, which was to distribute gold among the neighboring tribes in accordance with their agreements with the empire. These included the Misimians, who were subjects of Tzathes, and so the initiative may have been intended to simultaneously strengthen the newly installed king's position in the region.<sup>67</sup> However, Soterichus quarreled with the Misimians and had their ambassadors publicly beaten after they expressed concern that he was planning to surrender one of their fortresses to the Alani (3.15.9–16.3). The result was the massacre of Soterichus and his forces, and then the plundering of the emperor's

money, leading Agathias to comment that the barbarians had behaved as though the men they had killed had been warring enemies (πολέμιοι) rather than allies, and that it was only after the bloodshed (μυαιφονία) had been concluded that they realized their danger and moved to defect to the Persians (3.17.1). Subsequent attempts to negotiate a peaceful settlement resulted instead in the Misimians murdering a delegation led by their neighbors, the Apsilians (4.15.6–7). Agathias states that it was this act of pollution (μίασμα), above all, that enraged the Roman army when the soldiers learned of it (4.16.3), and their response was especially harsh. Following the established pattern, an act of pollution leads to a military disaster that would not otherwise have happened, with a detachment of forty Roman cavalrymen holding off six hundred Misimians before the arrival of the main Roman force. After the Romans assaulted the fortress of Siderun where the Misimians had gathered, another massacre ensued. But on this occasion it was the Roman force that behaved with excessive brutality, as the innocent Misimian women and children were slaughtered because of their countrymen's offenses (4.19.3–6).<sup>68</sup> Although serving as the instrument of punishment for the initial act of pollution by the Misimians, the Roman force behaved with such cruelty that their deeds also crossed the boundaries of acceptability, leading to yet another reversal of fortune and another round of military setbacks before both sides, suitably chastened, formally agreed on a truce (4.20.1–7).

All of the examples discussed so far demonstrate the familiar moralizing aspect of Agathias's writing, with divine punishment falling upon those who commit acts of treachery and unjustified murder. This is one of the best-known features of the *Histories*. However, the prominent, often central, role of pollution within these examples and the frequency with which Agathias employs the language of pollution must also be recognized and incorporated into future discussions of his writing and worldview. In particular, Agathias appears to have maintained the established view of contamination, placing special emphasis on the idea of pollution being something that can be "shared," whether through inaction or outright complicity. This idea is bolstered by the behavior attributed to both Athanasius and Narses, whose actions ensure that they are not forced

64 A. F. Delgado, "Fiat iustitia imperialis! La celebración de un juicio público en época justiniana: El testimonio de Agatías Escolástico," *Revista General de Derecho Romano* 34 (2020): 1–34, at 30–31.

65 Earlier in his account (2.18.6), however, Agathias acknowledges that Justinian had shown unshakable loyalty to Gubazes, refusing to abandon him and his people to the Persians, remembering that they were both his subjects and fellow Christians.

66 See *PLRE* 3.1180–81, s.v. "Soterichus 1."

67 Delgado, "Fiat iustitia imperialis!," 16.

68 Kaldellis, "The Historical and Religious Views of Agathias" (n. 1 above), 213.

into such a position. While pollution appears sparingly in Procopius's *Wars*, the concept of its being something that could be shared appears more than once and may have influenced Agathias. If this was the case, Agathias certainly took the idea much further than Procopius, but both authors were clearly thinking along similar lines. The first instance occurs within Procopius's account of the Nika riot (1.24.6), in which he refers, with a mix of astonishment and disapproval, to the fact that even women share with the men in the *ἄγος* that accompanies the violence of the circus factions (μεταλαγχάνουσι δὲ τοῦ ἄγους τοῦτου καὶ γυναῖκες αὐτοῖς). Procopius suggests that this is the result of a "disease of the soul" (ψυχῆς νόσημα).<sup>69</sup> The concept reappears in the final book of the *Wars*, in his account of the negotiations concerning the return of a fugitive who had fled to Thorisin and the Gepids as a suppliant and whose return was demanded by both Justinian and Audoin, the ruler of the Lombards. Procopius states that the leading men of the Gepids advised Thorisin that such a betrayal would be unthinkable and that the death of their entire people was preferable to such an impious act that would mark the Gepids as unholy (ἀνόσιος).<sup>70</sup> Thorisin attempted to frustrate the request by demanding the return of an equally valuable suppliant from the Lombards, leading to a stalemate "since neither the Lombards nor the Gepids were willing to take on a share of the pollution" that would result from such a betrayal (ὥς οὔτε Λαγγοβάρδαι οὔτε Γήπαιδες ἐθέλουσι τοῦ μιάσματος μεταλαχεῖν).<sup>71</sup> Perhaps unsurprisingly, such notions of

contamination also appeared in the *Secret History* (9.25). Procopius describes the crowds of Constantinople shunning the young Theodora because of her reputation for indecency and because they feared that by drawing too near and coming into contact with her, they would be viewed as taking on a share of the aura of pollution that surrounded her (μεταλαχεῖν τοῦ μιάσματος). Across these various examples we see that the language of pollution maintained a degree of force and that its potential danger threatened not only the perpetrators of a strikingly wide variety of acts and offenses but also those who became complicit, even inadvertently. Such language and ideas also remained in circulation decades after Agathias, as Theophylact refers to a Roman army sharing (μετασχεῖν) in an act of pollution (μύσος) after the troops of the usurper Phocas were forced to look upon the decapitated heads of the emperor Maurice and his sons.<sup>72</sup> Like Agathias, Theophylact presents this pollution as the explanation for the various disasters that subsequently overtook Phocas's forces.

## Persia

It is already notable how frequently we have encountered pollution in Agathias's work in connection with the actions of outsiders, whether perpetrated by the Alamanni and Franks, the Heruls, or the Misimians. Only when Agathias wished to distance particular individuals or groups from the rest of Roman society did he ascribe pollution to the actions of Roman citizens, as he did in the case of Gubazes' killers. This use of pollution as a means of othering and externalizing is also displayed repeatedly in Agathias's treatment of Persia, Rome's principal opponent in this period. Agathias discusses aspects of Persian society at length at various points across the *Histories*. This attention is understandable, not only because Persia remained a perpetual concern for the empire in this period but also because of the historiographical tradition that influenced Agathias in his writing, in which ethnographic digressions played an important role. Pollution once again appears repeatedly throughout these sections, first in his description of Persian customs surrounding the disposal of corpses and in their alleged violations of the incest taboo (both heavily connected with pollution in Greek literature), and subsequently in his descriptions of Chosroes, Ardashir,

69 See Greatrex, *Procopius of Caesarea* (n. 7 above), 339, on the Platonic origins of the phrase.

70 For the connections between ἀνόσιος and pollution in tragedy, see Parker, *Miasma*, 98; D. J. Mastronade, *Euripides: Phoenissae*, *Edited with Introduction and Commentary* (Cambridge, 1994), 286–87; Petrovic and Petrovic, *Inner Purity*, 220, 227–29.

71 Curiously, such scruples about handing over the men did not prevent Thorisin and Audoin from solving the conundrum by clandestine means—each quietly doing away with the suppliant who was in their power, without any mention of pollution resulting from their violations of the rules of hospitality. See E. Nechaeva, "Défection et trahison: Les transfuges entre la législation et la diplomatie de l'Antiquité Tardive," in *Thémis en diplomatie: Droit et arguments juridiques dans les relations internationales*, ed. N. Drocourt and É. Schnakenbourg (Rennes, 2016), 223–41, at 230–39, and E. Nechaeva "International Political Hospitality and Non-Hospitality in Late Antiquity: High-Profile Strangers between Asylum and Extradition," in *Hospitalité et régulation de l'altérité dans l'Antiquité méditerranéenne*, ed. C. Fauchon-Claudon and M.-A. le Guennec (Bordeaux, 2022), 235–47, at 238–39.

72 Theoph. Sim. 8.12.8–11.



and Shapur I, where it serves to present the Sassanid dynasty as inherently polluted and unclean from the moment of its inception down to Agathias's own day.

It is unsurprising that pollution, in combination with broader ideas about what does and does not constitute dirtiness, should be used as a means of distinguishing between competing cultures and their values. Knowing instinctively where the lines of purity and cleanliness are drawn is a key component of "belonging" within one's social group and of perceiving and presenting outsiders as somehow inferior.<sup>73</sup> Agathias acknowledges this point when discussing Persian burial customs, conceding that every nation considers its own ways to be the best, no matter how bizarre they may appear to outsiders (2.23.8–9). His statement deliberately seeks to recall Herodotus's comments on the natural inclination of every man to prefer his own customs to those of foreigners. Herodotus's illustrative example had also involved the Persians, as he described King Darius's investigations into the treatment of corpses among the Greeks and Indians.<sup>74</sup> In this instance, however, the tables have been turned, and Agathias's readers are likely to have noted that whereas in Herodotus it was the Persian king inquiring about the treatment of corpses among non-Persians, here it is the customs of the Persians themselves that are presented as non-normative in the eyes of Greek onlookers. Agathias's statement appears at the end of his account of the burial of the Persian commander Mermeroes, whose body was exposed, according to Zoroastrian custom, to be devoured by dogs and birds. Even if Agathias had been attempting to offer an impartial report, his description of the carrion animals as νεκροβόρος and, in particular, as μαρός (2.22.6) is nevertheless inherently negative in its tone and would have been read as such by his contemporaries. It reflects the wider anxiety in the Greek tradition toward the unburied corpse, especially when it is in danger of becoming prey for carrion animals.<sup>75</sup> Whereas from the Zoroastrian point of

view the priority was to prevent the body from coming into contact with water or earth and so polluting one of the sacred elements, from the Greek point of view the unburied corpse had traditionally been viewed as a significant source of danger to society, conceptualized as pollution, which we have already seen in Agathias's description of the indiscriminate slaughter carried out by the Franks and the Alamanni.<sup>76</sup> In perhaps the best-known example of this form of pollution, in Sophocles' *Antigone*, it is notable that it is not only the unburied corpse of Polyneices that causes pollution and contaminates the city but also the scattering of his body, specifically by carrion birds and dogs. Similarly, Homer's *Iliad* begins by announcing the intention to sing of the rage of Achilles that led to the deaths of so many Greeks, condemned to lie unburied as prey for the birds and beasts.<sup>77</sup> The conflicting values surrounding this issue remained a source of tension in Justinian's day, as is shown in the treaty agreed to with Persia in 561 CE, which contained a clause stipulating that Christians living within Persian territory "would be permitted to bury their dead in graves, as is our custom."<sup>78</sup> Expanding on the subject of Persian burial customs, Agathias again refers to notions of purity as a means of demonstrating cultural values, noting that for less distinguished members of Persian society (ἀσημότεροι), the weak and sick might be exposed before death with only the barest provisions. Those who somehow survived and returned home were regarded as still tainted by the stain of death,

in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, ed. E. Yarshater, vol. 6 (London, 1993), 279–86; A. De Jong, *Traditions of the Magi: Zoroastrianism in Greek and Latin Literature* (Leiden, 1997), 234–39; E. Lung, "Religious Identity as Seen by Sixth-Century Historians and Chroniclers," in *Pagans and Christians in the Late Roman Empire: New Evidence, New Approaches (4th–8th Centuries)*, ed. M. Sághy and E. M. Schoolman (Budapest, 2017), 119–30, at 129. On the conflicting purity values of Greek, Roman, and Zoroastrian societies, see De Jong, *Traditions of the Magi*, 414–15; Frendo, "Agathias' View" (n. 20 above), 101–4.

<sup>76</sup> Within the same discussion, Agathias does show an awareness of the sacred role of water within broader Zoroastrian tradition, which he claims led the Persians to limit their use of it to drinking and irrigation to avoid sullyng it (Agath. 2.24.11).

<sup>77</sup> Soph. *Ant.* 1016–17; Hom. *Il.* 1.1–5; Parker, *Miasma*, 45–48; D. B. Gowler, *Host, Guest, Enemy, and Friend: Portraits of the Pharisees in Luke and Acts* (New York, 1991), 103; Meinel, *Pollution* (n. 56 above), 84–86; Petrovic and Petrovic, *Inner Purity*, 129; A. M. McClellan, *Abused Bodies in Roman Epic* (Cambridge, 2019), 30–33.

<sup>78</sup> Menander Protector, frag. 6.1 (trans. R. C. Blockley, *The History of Menander the Guardsman* [Cambridge, 1985]); Kaldellis, *Procopius* (n. 2 above), 93.

<sup>73</sup> M. Kahlos, introduction to *The Faces of the Other: Religious Rivalry and Ethnic Encounters in the Later Roman World*, ed. Kahlos (Turnhout, 2011), 1–15, at 11–13; J. J. Lennon, *Dirt and Denigration: Stigma and Marginalisation in Ancient Rome* (Tübingen, 2022), 166–68.

<sup>74</sup> Hdt. 3.38; Kaldellis, *Ethnography After Antiquity* (n. 26 above), 25.

<sup>75</sup> A. Cameron, "Agathias on the Sassanians," *DOP* 23/24 (1969/70): 67–183, at 90–91; O. Nicholson, "Two Notes on Dara," *AJA* 89.4 (1985): 663–71, at 668–69; M. Boyce, "Corpse, Disposal of, in Zoroastrianism,"

and Agathias's description suggests that he was confident that his readers would understand the sentiments on display concerning the pollution that came even through proximity to death:

εἰ δέ τις οὕτως ἐπανήξει, ἐκτρέπονται γε αὐτὸν ἅπαντες καὶ ἀποφεύγουσιν ὥς ἐναγέστατον καὶ ὑπὸ τοὺς χθονίους ἔτι τελούντα, καὶ οὐ πρότερόν οἱ ἐφέϊται τῶν ξυνήθων μεταλαχεῖν διαιτημάτων, πρὶν ὑπὸ τῶν μάγων ἀποκαθαρθεῖν τὸ μίasma δῆθεν τοῦ ἐλπισθέντος θανάτου καὶ οἶον ἀνταπολάβοι τὸ αὖθις βίῳ. <sup>79</sup>

And if someone has returned in this way, they all turn him away and flee from him, considering that he is most polluted and still under the jurisdiction of the chthonic gods, and he is not allowed to participate in the customary things of life until the pollution of the expected death has been purified by the magi and he has received in exchange, as it were, the living of life again.

The clash of views concerning exposure is further demonstrated in Agathias's account of the Athenian Academy's philosophers, after they fled Justinian's empire and sought sanctuary at the court of Chosroes. Disappointed both with the Persian king's limited philosophical learning and with the mores of Persian society in general, they eventually chose to return to the empire—but on their journey back they discovered an unburied corpse and judged it impious (οὐχ ὅσιον) to leave it exposed (2.31.6). Their attempts to bury it were frustrated, however, after one of their group received a warning in a dream that "Earth, the mother of all, does not accept a mother-defiling man."<sup>80</sup> The philosophers

found the corpse exhumed again the next day and made no further attempts to complete the burial (2.31.7–8). As has been noted, the whole scene (and particularly the dream oracle) especially emphasizes the two cultural practices attributed to the Persians that most concerned Greek onlookers: the exposure of corpses without burial and the practice of incest, both of which had always traditionally been said to result in pollution.<sup>81</sup> Agathias claims that these practices, in particular, were not present in Persia before the arrival of Zoroastrianism, which he presents as having utterly corrupted Persian society (2.24.5).<sup>82</sup> To demonstrate this point, he offers two stories: first, that of the Assyrian queen Semiramis, who sought an incestuous relationship with her son, who Agathias claims decided to kill her because he preferred to take on the ἄγος that came with matricide rather than that which would come from incest (2.24.2–3);<sup>83</sup> and second, that of Parysatis, the mother of Artaxerxes, who similarly shook off his mother's advances, calling them "impious, and neither traditional nor customary in their way of life" (2.24.2–4).<sup>84</sup> Both cases involve the rejection of incestuous relationships, although of course the rejections were possible only after they had been attempted in the first place. Agathias claims that the Persians of his own day had given up all pretense of adhering to such taboos. Certainly, there are indications of close-kin marriages occurring in the regions around Persia during the sixth century, especially in Justinian's 154th *Novel*, whose sentiments were repeated by a subsequent law of his successor, Justin II. Both laws

this statement and Agathias's earlier discussion of the treatment of Mermeroes' body, where the historian demonstrates awareness of the custom of exposure as the standard method of disposal, not one reserved solely as a punishment for criminals or the impious. Theoph. Sim. 4.4.14 also shows some confusion concerning the custom.

<sup>81</sup> Cameron, "Agathias on the Sassanians," 91; Nicholson, "Two Notes on Dara," 668; A. D. Lee, *Information and Frontiers: Roman Foreign Relations in Late Antiquity* (Cambridge, 1993), 103; B. Isaac, *The Near East under Roman Rule: Selected Papers* (Leiden, 1998), 440, and *The Invention of Racism in Classical Antiquity* (Princeton, 2004), 378–79; Frendo, "Agathias' View," 103–4; H. Börm, *Prokop und die Perser: Untersuchungen zu den römisch-sasanidischen Kontakten in der ausgehenden Spätantike* (Stuttgart, 2007), 187–88.

<sup>82</sup> T. Briscoe, "Rome and Persia: Rhetoric and Religion," in *Byzantium, Its Neighbours and Its Cultures*, ed. D. Dzino and K. Parry (Leiden, 2017), 155–68, at 161–62.

<sup>83</sup> Cf. Diod. Sic. 2.13.3–4; Just. *Epit.* 1.2.10; Oros. 1.4; Procop. *SH* 1.9; Cameron, "Agathias on the Sassanians," 92.

<sup>84</sup> ὥς οὐχ ὅσιον ὄν τοῦτό γε οὐδὲ πάτριον οὐδὲ τῷ βίῳ ξυνειθισμένον.

<sup>79</sup> Agath. 2.23.7. The interpretation shows logic strikingly similar to that offered by Livy (8.10.11–14) concerning the expiatory measures to be taken if a Roman commander survived a battle after undergoing *devotio* and offering himself to the gods of the Underworld. In his impure state, the commander could not offer sacrifice or enter a sanctuary. See Lennon, *Pollution and Religion* (n. 40 above), 114 (with bibliography).

<sup>80</sup> Γῇ πάντων μήτηρ μητροφθόρον οὐ δέχετ' ἄνδρα (Agath. 2.31.7). This is the second of a pair of hexameters that Agathias quotes here, which also appear in the *Greek Anthology* (*Anth. Pal.* 9.498). By introducing the lines with the phrase τόδε τὸ ἔπος, Agathias points out that their meter suggests an oracular utterance. Al. Cameron, *Wandering Poets and Other Essays on Late Greek Literature and Philosophy* (Oxford, 2016), 218–19, points to the apparent discrepancy between

acknowledged and sought to curtail the ongoing practice of close-kin marriages that were taking place in the regions of Osroene and Mesopotamia, the areas closest to, and so most susceptible to cultural contamination from, Persia.<sup>85</sup> As a trained lawyer, Agathias would certainly have had greater awareness of those laws than most, which would have further ingrained the belief that such practices were to be found not only in Persia's distant past but also in its present-day customs.<sup>86</sup>

Agathias returns to the subject of Persia in book 4, after finishing his account of the rebellion of the Misimians. Having previously described several Persian military setbacks (3.18.1–28.10), he details the brutal punishment inflicted by Chosroes on his unsuccessful general Nachoragan:

οὐ γὰρ ἀποχρῶσαν ᾤετο εἶναι ποινὴν τῆς ἀνανδρίας τὸ οὕτω γοῦν αὐτὸν ἀπλῶς ἀποκτείνειν, ἀλλ' ἐκ τοῦ αὐχένος τὸ δέρμα διαχαράζας ἀπέδειρεν ἅπαν μέχρι τοῖν ποδοῖν καὶ ἀφείλετο τῶν σαρκῶν πρὸς τὰ ἔνδον ἀνεστραμμένον, ὥς καὶ τοὺς τύπους τῶν μορίων ἐς τοῦ μπαλιν ὑποφαίνεσθαι καὶ δίκην ἀσκού ἡρέμα ἐμπνευσθὲν ὑπὲρ σκόλοπός τινος ἀνηρτῆσθαι, οἰκτρὸν τι θέαμα καὶ μιαιρώτατον καὶ πρῶτω, οἶμαι, Σαπώρη ἐκείνῳ τῷ πολλῷ

85 N. van der Wal, *Manuale Novellarum Justiniani*, 2nd ed. (Groningen, 1998), 71. See further H. Chadwick, "The Relativity of Moral Codes: Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity," in *Early Christian Literature and the Classical Intellectual Tradition*, ed. W. R. Schoedel and R. L. Wilken (Paris, 1979), 135–53, at 150–51; A. D. Lee, "Close-Kin Marriage in Late Antique Mesopotamia," *GRBS* 29.4 (1988): 403–13; D. Feissel, "Deux épi grammes d'Apamène et l'éloge de l'endogamie dans une famille syrienne du VI<sup>e</sup> siècle," in *AETOS: Studies in Honour of C. Mango Presented to Him on April 14, 1998*, ed. I. Ševčenko and I. Hutter (Stuttgart, 1998), 116–36, esp. 125–36; P. J. Frandsen, *Incestuous and Close-Kin Marriage in Ancient Egypt and Persia: An Examination of the Evidence* (Copenhagen, 2009), 100–102; G. Traina, "L'empire chrétien et l'inceste oriental," in *Les stratégies familiales dans l'Antiquité Tardive*, ed. C. Badel and C. Settapani (Paris, 2012), 167–79, at 172–75; D. J. D. Miller and P. Sarris, *The Novels of Justinian: A Complete Annotated English Translation* (Cambridge, 2018), 975.

86 On the potential ideological conflicts caused by this clash of values—including for Christians living within Persian territory, who appear sometimes to have followed Persian marriage customs—see R. E. Payne, *A State of Mixture: Christians, Zoroastrians, and Iranian Political Culture in Late Antiquity* (Oakland, CA, 2015), esp. 108–17, and R. E. Payne, "Sex, Death, and Aristocratic Empire: Iranian Jurisprudence in Late Antiquity," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 58.2 (2016): 519–49, at 530.

ἐμπροσθεν Χοσρόου Περσῶν βεβασιλευκότι τετόλμημένον.<sup>87</sup>

For he thought that simply killing him was not sufficient punishment for his cowardice, but he tore off and flayed his whole skin, from his neck right down to his feet, removed it from the flesh and turned it inside out, so that the marks of the body parts were even visible, in reverse; and it was blown up a little, like a wineskin, and suspended on top of a pole—a pitiful and most contaminated sight, and, I think, something dared first by the well-known Shapur, who had been the king of the Persians a long time before Chosroes.

Agathias again works to portray non-Romans as more likely to engage in polluting behavior. By linking such practices to Shapur he was also able to emphasize the Sassanid dynasty's inherent cruelty, which Chosroes continues to perpetuate by following Shapur's example, and to underscore the Persians' near-perpetual enmity with Rome, since Agathias repeats the story that Shapur inflicted this punishment upon the captured Roman emperor Valerian. The cruelty attributed to the Persians is emphatically linked with pollution, which Agathias traces back to both Shapur and his father Ardashir:

καὶ τάχα οἱ πρώτιστοι τῶν μετὰ τὴν Παρθυαίων κατὰ λυσιν τῆς Περσικῆς βασιλείας ἐπιλαβόμενων, Ἀρταξάρης, φημί, καὶ Σαπώρης, μιαιρὼ γε ἦσθην ἄμφω καὶ ἀδικωτάτω, εἴ γε ὁ μὲν τὸν οἰκείον δεσπότην ἀπεκτονῶς τυραννικὴν τε καὶ βίαιον τὴν ἀρχὴν κατεκτήσατο, ἄτερος δὲ τιμωρίας ἤρξεν οὕτω δεινῆς καὶ μύσους ἀνοσιωτάτου.<sup>88</sup>

And from the beginning, the very first of those men who seized the Persian throne after the fall of the Parthians—Ardashir, I mean, and Shapur—were both polluted and most unjust, if indeed the one murdered his own lord and got power that was tyrannical and violent, and the other initiated such terrible vengeance and most unholy impurity.

87 Agath. 4.23.3. See also *PLRE* 3.909–10, s.v. "Nachoragan."

88 Agath. 4.23.8. Cf. Cameron, "Agathias on the Sassanians," 174.



The fate of Nachoragan also enabled Agathias to allude to the mythical story of Marsyas, who was said to have suffered a similar fate at the hands of Apollo; Agathias refers to the act specifically as a *μίασμα* (4.23.6).<sup>89</sup> After making this allusion and quoting the relevant lines of Nonnus, displaying his broader learning and literary tastes, Agathias proceeds to reject the tale, professing that he puts no faith in the stories of poets.<sup>90</sup> But despite putting aside such examples taken from myth, Agathias reasserts the claim that Shapur was the most unjust (*ἄδικος*) and bloodstained (*μυιφόνος*) of men, even if he is forced to acknowledge that it was possible that this particular act of pollution (*ἄγος*) had been committed by someone at some point before the king.<sup>91</sup> He expands upon the alleged atrocities committed by Shapur, describing the king during his invasion of the eastern empire as riding across a bridge of corpses between mountains. This is reminiscent of earlier depictions of the Carthaginian general Hannibal, emphasizing both the scale of Shapur's reputation and the degree to which Agathias sought to denigrate him.<sup>92</sup> In keeping with the broader themes within the *Histories*, Agathias links Shapur's arrogant and bloodthirsty actions to a consequent and justly deserved defeat (4.24.4).<sup>93</sup> The

examples of pollution connected to Ardashir, Shapur, and Chosroes within this brief section serve as the introduction to the much broader digression on Persian royal history and make Agathias's negative views of the Sassanid dynasty clear from the start.

Through these various examples, Agathias was able to portray Sassanid Persian culture and history as being inherently stained with pollution, and Cameron has argued that it is in his use of such language that he revealed his true feelings concerning Persia.<sup>94</sup> Despite his attempts at impartial reporting, Agathias chose to draw attention to those aspects of Persian culture that were most violently at odds with his own, which also happened to concern acts and practices that were frequently recalled in Greek tragedy and myth. Given that context, the language of pollution would have been understood as entirely appropriate in discussions of peoples said to engage in incestuous relationships, who seemingly left their dead untreated and at the mercy of unclean carrion animals, and whose tyrannical leaders committed heinous acts and inflicted vile and unusual punishments upon their own men.



In discussing Agathias's use of digressions, Sarah Gador-Whyte has emphasized the deliberate blending of past and present traditions within the *Histories*, designed "to preserve the past and maintain the connection or continuity of classical culture with that of the sixth century."<sup>95</sup> Agathias succeeded in this regard on both the historical and literary levels, and pollution played a key role in his success. Throughout the text it was deployed repeatedly as an explanation for misfortunes—not only those suffered by the perpetrators of particularly heinous

89 On the wider tradition connecting the Persians and the practice of flaying, see S. Mazzarino, *Il basso impero: Antico, tardoantico ed era costantiniana*, 2 vols. (Bari, 1980), 2:83–85.

90 Nonnus, *Dion.* 1.40–44. Cf. H. Hunger, "On the Imitation (ΜΙΜΗΣΙΣ) of Antiquity in Byzantine Literature," *DOP* 23/24 (1969/70): 15–38, at 25; Kaldellis, "Agathias on History and Poetry" (n. 4 above), 300. For Agathias's broader familiarity with Nonnus, see Cameron, *Agathias* (n. 1 above), 24–25.

91 The fate of the emperor Valerian remained foremost in Agathias's mind (4.23.7), although the story of Valerian being flayed appears to deviate from the more widely accepted tradition: Isaac, *The Near East*, 440–41. Cf. E. Reiner, "The Reddling of Valerian," *CQ* 56.1 (2006): 325–29. The flaying of Valerian was also described as a polluted, defiling act (*μυσαρός*) by Peter the Patrician (frag. 201; T. M. Banchich, *The Lost History of Peter the Patrician* [London, 2015], 134).

92 Agath. 4.24.3; B. Dignas and E. Winter, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity: Neighbours and Rivals* (Cambridge, 2007), 262–63. For reports of Hannibal creating a bridge of corpses, see Livy 23.5; Val. Max. 9.2 ext. 2; Sil. *Pun.* 8.668–70; Flor. 1.22.18; App. *Hann.* 28; D. Levene, *Livy on the Hannibalic War* (Oxford, 2010), 161. Once again, such practices appear to have been excusable if performed by Romans. Val. Max. 7.6.5 describes Julius Caesar using enemy corpses to construct a makeshift rampart without any hint of criticism.

93 Theoph. Sim. 4.5.6 includes the equally hyperbolic accusation that Chosroes' son Hormisdas had, through the scale of the slaughter he oversaw, made the river Tigris traversable by foot. Theophylact also

refers to the drowning of his victims in the Tigris earlier at 3.16.9. J. D. Frendo, "Theophylact Simocatta on the Revolt of Bahram Chobin and the Early Career of Khusrau II," *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 3 (1989): 77–88, at 79, highlights the scale of the offense of such acts from the Persian point of view (misunderstood by Theophylact), which again hinges upon the Zoroastrian rules regarding the exposure of dead bodies where they will touch neither earth nor water.

94 Cameron, "Agathias on the Sassanians," 174.

95 Gador-Whyte, "Digressions" (n. 4 above), 150. Cf. Cameron, *Agathias*, 99; P. Odorico, "Displaying la littérature Byzantine," in *Proceedings of the 21st International Congress of Byzantine Studies, London, 21–26 August, 2006*, vol. 1, *Plenary Papers*, ed. E. Jeffreys, F. K. Haarer, and J. Gilliland (London, 2006), 213–34, esp. 224–25.



crimes (especially murder), but also those that overtook bystanders who had failed to prevent or punish such deeds when it was within their power to do so. We have seen, in particular, the repeated use and combination of *μίασμα* and *ἄγος*, both of which led inexorably to divine retribution in ways that were entirely in keeping with classical traditions, both literary and religious. The significance of pollution within pre-Christian religious belief and ritual, as well as its recurring appearances in works of philosophy, is a point of some importance and requires further consideration. Despite the long-standing links between pollution and other established “pagan” practices (including the blood sacrifices that had often served as the traditional means of catharsis), and despite the censorious nature of the society in which he was writing, the use of such language and imagery apparently presented no problem for Agathias or, we can assume, his contemporary audience.

The most obvious explanation is simply to assume that references to *μίασμα* and *ἄγος* would have been understood as yet another example of Agathias’s writing evoking the classical past by calling upon easily recognizable devices. As we have argued, this is an aspect of his writing that has not previously been appreciated and is significant in and of itself. However, while such an interpretation is appropriate, it tells only part of the story. On its own, it does not take into account the fact that pollution was never a static concept, nor does it convey the extent to which Christian writers had for centuries worked to appropriate the language and imagery of dirt, pollution, and contamination, often turning it back against the pagan religions that had used these images before, utilizing the language of pollution and contamination as effective and persuasive weapons against them.<sup>96</sup> From early on, this was often a central element of Christian writing, especially in the

apologetic tradition.<sup>97</sup> By the sixth century Christianity had firmly established itself as the dominant religion, and in the process it had also achieved primacy in terms of controlling the interpretation of what did or did not constitute pollution.<sup>98</sup> If we look to the *Ecclesiastical History* of Evagrius Scholasticus, a contemporary of Agathias whose Christian credentials are certainly not in doubt, we see that he too was comfortable using such language to impart his views. For example, he wrote with approval of the emperor Anastasius’s decision to abolish the Chrysargyron, a tax that fell primarily on merchants but also on prostitutes, declaring it to be a source of defilement (*μύσος*) and pollution (*ἄγος*) for the state (3.39).<sup>99</sup> He also criticized members of the Green faction because they committed a number of murders (*μυαιφονία*) after, he claims, they were driven away from their communities like a pollution (*ἄγος*; 4.32).<sup>100</sup>

As a result, it was possible for Agathias to use pollution in ways that emulated the classical tradition while simultaneously reflecting wider trends in the development of Christian thought. Such language would not stand out as a jarring or quaint anachronism, not only because it had evolved to become an established part of the Christian landscape but also because the sentiments behind the language remained entirely consistent with commonly accepted beliefs. The ideas underpinning pollution could therefore straddle both worlds, safely evoking the classical past while simultaneously reinforcing a more overtly Christian worldview.<sup>101</sup> Therefore,

96 See, in particular, M. Kahlos, “Polluted by Sacrifices: Christian Repugnance at Participation in Sacrificial Rituals in Late Antiquity,” in *Religious Participation in Ancient and Medieval Societies: Rituals, Interaction and Identity*, ed. S. Katajala-Peltomaa and V. Vuolanto (Rome, 2013), 159–71. Also see M. R. Salzman, “The Evidence for the Conversion of the Roman Empire to Christianity in Book 16 of the *Theodosian Code*,” *Historia* 42.3 (1993): 362–78, at 368; B. Leyerle, “Refuse, Filth, and Excrement in the Homilies of John Chrysostom,” *JLA* 2.2 (2009): 337–56; J. J. Lennon, “Jupiter Latiaris and the Taurobolium: Inversions of Cleansing in Christian Polemic,” *Historia* 59.3 (2010): 381–84; M. Kahlos, “The Shadow of the Shadow: Examining Christian Fourth and Fifth Century Depictions of Pagans,” in Kahlos, *The Faces of the Other* (n. 73 above), 165–95, at 180–83.

97 See, for example, Tert. *Apol.* 9.13, 14.1, 15.3–4, 21.8, 23.14, 30.6; Tert. *De spect.* 8, 10–11, 17; Tert. *De corona* 12–13; Min. Fel. *Oct.* 25.8, 30.4–31.1; Arn. *Adv. nat.* 1.6.1, 1.25.3, 2.30–34, 4.16.3, 5.18.1–2; Euseb. *Hist. eccl.* 8.3.2, 8.10.10; Prudent. *Perist.* 10.101–3.

98 On the importance of establishing control over such interpretations, see P. Burschel, *Die Erfindung der Reinheit: Eine andere Geschichte der frühen Neuzeit* (Göttingen, 2014), 17–18.

99 Malalas 16.398; G. Ostrogorsky, *History of the Byzantine State*, trans. J. Hussey (Oxford, 1968), 65; A. D. Lee, “The Eastern Empire: Theodosius to Anastasius,” in Cameron, Ward-Perkins, and Whitby, *Late Antiquity* (n. 9 above), 33–62, at 54.

100 Evagrius also described the expulsion of Origenists “as if they were causes of general pollution” (*ὥσπερ ἄγῃ κοινά*): Evagrius 4.38 (trans. M. Whitby, *The Ecclesiastical History of Evagrius Scholasticus* [Liverpool, 2000], 242–43).

101 Cf. Scott, “The Treatment of Religion” (n. 2 above), 211–12: “[W]riters did try to do more than just take on matters of language and incidents but they actually tried to absorb the culture and spirit of their models. This has given the appearance of paganism, although those same writers still either do not hide or cannot hide a Christian mindset.”

as we noted at the start, it is possible that Agathias was thinking in terms of sin and its punishment when crafting his account, but by drawing on the language of pollution he was able to address a far wider range of persons and activities than might otherwise have been covered by his speaking of sin, while at the same time maintaining his classicizing façade without offending the sensibilities of his readers. His work shows the extent to which pollution continued to hold a degree of literary currency in the sixth century, in no small part because of the church's eager adoption of that same vocabulary.

As we have argued, Agathias clearly went further than any other writer of the sixth century in the frequency with which he called upon these ideas and the central role that they often played in advancing his narrative. In his account of the Franks and the Alamanni, in particular, they had an additional function, offering a potential explanation for the destruction of the Christian Franks who had allegedly played no part in the Alamanni's acts of pollution and desecration. By failing to prevent the Alamanni's acts of sacrilege and continuing to fight alongside them, the Franks took on a share of the pollution and so suffered the same fate, succumbing to disease and ignominious defeat. This fear that complicit bystanders might "share" in pollution occurred across numerous other examples that have been discussed and was one of the few attitudes about pollution that was consistently repeated by other writers. Such fear might be seen in Narses' careful avoidance of complicity through his punishment of his own troops when they committed unjust killings, or the repeated warnings surrounding the murder of Gubazes that anyone who failed to act justly in response to the crime (whether they be Lazic or Roman) risked taking on a share of the pollution that was not limited solely to those *μυαιφόντοι* who had struck the fatal blow. When misdeeds were perpetrated by Romans in Agathias's *Histories*, the potential pollution was most speedily expiated by the application of justice and the swift and full punishment of the guilty. When such action was not forthcoming, military setbacks and disasters would follow. Acknowledgment of the contaminating effects of *μίασμα* appears to have remained entrenched, as is attested across the works of Procopius, Agathias, and Theophylact, who present a consistent understanding of its role in articulating both guilt and complicity. At the same time, Agathias's references to the impurity of outsiders, especially in relation to Persia (but also in

comments concerning the actions or beliefs of other non-Romans), demonstrate the continued validity of pollution and the language of dirt, staining, and contamination as means of asserting the manifest inferiority of neighboring cultures and religions. In the case of contemporary Persian culture such references were frequently packaged in terms that recalled some of the best-known sources of pollution from Greek literature. Knowledge of such works on the part of Agathias's audience would have added an additional layer of complexity to his work. Yet even if some of his audience were unfamiliar with these deep-rooted traditions, the language of dirt and contamination, with its intrinsic appeals to aversion and disgust, nevertheless played an important role in perpetuating prejudices and animosities toward outsiders, while simultaneously demonstrating to and reinforcing for Roman audiences "proper" values and behavior. While critics of Agathias may point to many areas in which his work was deficient as an example of a history, by considering his careful and considered use of pollution we may catch a glimpse, however briefly, of his deeper learning and literary skill.

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